



Katherine Anne Porter: Feeling, Form, and Truth

● John V. Hagopian

Paradox and ambiguity mark the woman and her work, and despite the widespread influence of the New Criticism, paradox and ambiguity remain obstacles to popularity. Thus Katherine Anne Porter has been until the appearance of *Ship of Fools* the most highly praised writer of short stories among professional American critics and the least read great writer among the general public. She is by far America's finest living writer of short stories. Her production is small — only four volumes of fiction: *Flowering Judas* (1930; 1935), *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), *The Leaning Tower* (1944), *Ship of Fools* (1962), a novel; and a collection of essays, *The Days Before* (1952). It is not that she writes slowly, for she pounds the typewriter at top speed; but she prunes mercilessly, refusing to publish anything which she feels isn't perfect: she has burned four complete novels and dozens of short stories. However, once she has decided that the job is done, no editor or critic in the world can make her change a word.

Katherine Anne Porter was born May 15, 1890 in Texas, and she is proud of the fact that she is a descendant of Daniel Boone. When she was very young, her family moved to Kyle, Texas, where she was cared for by her grandmother. She has been a constantly mobile person, making her home at various times in New York, Chicago, Mexico City, Bermuda, Paris, Berlin, Yaddo, Santa Monica, California, and now in Washington, D. C. And her writings have settings quite as various as those of her life — and situations too: circuses and cemeteries, city slums of the North, plantations and remote small farms of the South, the Mexican Revolution, the early days of Hitler's Berlin. She has been involved in the rich hurly-burly of life in so many places and with so many different kinds of people that she is simply unable to boil it all down to a formula, to an easy explanation. She once described the work of Katherine Mansfield in terms that exactly fit herself: "She states no belief, gives no motives, airs no theories, but simply presents to the reader a situation, a place, and a character, and there it is; and the emotional content is present as implicitly as the germ is in the grain of wheat."

Critics have said that she is fundamentally an historical writer concerned with the transition of the South from its ante-bellum glory to its present social jungle; that she is fundamentally a political writer engaged in a battle against Fascism; that she is fundamentally a religious writer, or at least a writer preoccupied with the decline of religion in human affairs; that she is fundamentally an autobiographical writer, concerned with ordering the chaos of her own life; that she is fundamentally an existentialist writer, delineating the impossibility of ordering the chaos of any life. The trouble with these

classifications is that they are all true — superficially — and all false, ultimately. The ultimate is art, and art from her point of view has no intimate permanent relationship with history, politics, religion, philosophy, or autobiography. That is to say, the substance of these things is merely clay out of which the artist fashions emotionally-charged images of human experiences. The important thing is the emotional charge, the intensity of the feeling as it is manifested in language. She has maintained this attitude throughout her life as an artist. In December 1931, shortly after the publication of her first book, she wrote to a friend from Berlin:

I can't tell you what gives true intensity, but I know it when I find it, even in my own work . . . It is not a matter of how you feel at any one moment, certainly not at the moment of writing. A calculated coldness is the best mood for that most often. Feeling is more than a mood: it is a whole way of being; it is the nature you are born with, you cannot invent it. The question is how to convey a sense of whatever is there, *as feeling*, within you, to the reader; and that is a problem of technical expertness.

The key words here are *true intensity, feeling, calculated coldness*, and *technical expertness*. Here is no possession by a writing daemon, nor is there any concern with solving problems in history, philosophy, and such things. Here, to use the title of Susanne Langer's magnificent book, is a preoccupation with *feeling and form*. And because with her integrity she creates unique forms of genuine feeling, critics are often at a loss to know what to do with her. Even if one does not make allowances for the limited number of her works, the range and variety is astonishing. Once you have read a Porter story, you cannot pick up the next one with any certainty that you know what to expect.

Even so, some generalizations can be ventured — though they must be rather broad and loose — before we examine certain specific works. First, she is an unusually sensitive writer, depending upon subtle details to communicate the essence of an experience, and not on any single prominent detail but an accumulation of subtle details. Secondly, her characters are never types, but specific people that cannot properly be labeled with tags. They are complex human beings whom we get to know gradually, and whom we know fully at the end. They are, in fact, defined by what they do and by what happens to them. Thirdly, she is a master of symbolism, but hers is generally not an obvious or overt symbolism: the symbolism is embedded so fully in the narrative that certain innocent critics have thought her to be a straight realist. Fourthly, her narrative method is usually that of indirect dialogue or monologue; the idiom and mental rhythm of her central character dominates the language. The purpose of this technique is to control the sequence of perceptions and misperceptions while at the same time maintaining a certain distance from the narrative events. It works perfectly.

Finally, the basic experience presented in her fiction is the process of self-discovery (or the failure of self-discovery), one of the oldest and most important experiences that literature has dealt with; *Oedipus* is an example.

Her settings — no matter how exotic or how vividly presented — must not mislead into the false idea she is concerned with, say, German Fascism in *The Leaning Tower*. Nor is the Mexican Revolution of *Flowering Judas* of central importance: any left-wing revolutionary movement will do. What is important is that in such settings, a specific human being with a certain degree of sensitivity comes to a profound realization of his own essential self.

Let us test the theory as it applies to Katherine Anne Porter by examining one of the most overtly historical of her stories, "Old Mortality." The central character is a girl named Miranda, who figures in seven of the stories and who is obviously a projection of the writer herself, whose family past is embodied in a grandmother that evokes life of the old plantations. The story is in three parts; part one is dated 1885-1902. Here the Southern myth is shown as it is believed by a child who listens in wide-eyed wonder to stories of olden days, especially with stories dealing with the beautiful, mysterious, romantic Aunt Amy, who was pursued by dozens of suitors, the most eager of whom was Uncle Gabriel. Even though he had fought a duel for her, Amy had long rejected him. Suddenly for some strange reason, she agreed to marry him, and they go to New Orleans for their honeymoon. Six weeks later she is mysteriously dead, leaving behind the legendary image of beauty and romance, an idol for the young girls of the family to worship.

The second part, dated 1904, shows Miranda at ten in a convent school in New Orleans. She secretly reads lurid novels about nuns who have illegitimate children which they secretly murder. Miranda thinks she would like to grow up to become a nun, but to be a jockey and ride horses would be much better. Her father comes for a holiday visit and takes her to the horse races, where they unexpectedly meet none other than Uncle Gabriel himself — now a drunken sot with a broken-down horse running at 100 to 1 odds. Miraculously the horse wins, and Gabriel in joy insists on taking them home with him. But home is a cheap hotel in the slums where Gabriel's second wife sits exhausted after years of economic privation and listening to Gabriel's praise of his first wife's beauty. Miranda comes to despise Gabriel. Thus in this part of the story, one half of the Romantic Tradition is exposed, but there remains the second half, Aunt Amy, who is safely dead and presumably unable to violate the image she has left behind.

Part III, dated 1912, shows Miranda, having eloped from convent school and having been disowned by her family, boarding a train to go home for the funeral of Uncle Gabriel, who had insisted on being buried next to his first wife, Amy. (The big scenes of Southern novels are invariably family assemblies for weddings and funerals.) Aboard the train Miranda meets Cousin Eva, an aged domineering woman, a homely old witch who is a leader of the feminist movement and who is also on her way to the funeral. In her reminiscences about the past, Eva explodes the legend of Aunt Amy, and the ensuing situation reveals by implication that Amy had probably been a sexually reckless woman and had probably died in New Orleans as a result of an abortion. Thus the other half of the Southern legend is shattered for Miranda, the Southern past is revealed as something less than cotton and magnolias and honor. And if the story ended on this note, one might indeed say of it that Miss Porter had fashioned a symbolic analogue of a facet of American history,

a sort of allegory. But the story does not end there; the focus is not on the past in Amy and Gabriel, but on the present in Miranda. As she listens to the hypocritical talk about Gabriel at his funeral, Miranda meditates.

What is the truth, she asked herself as intently as if the question had never been asked, the truth, about even the smallest, the least important of all things I must find out? And where shall I begin to look for it? Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people's memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show. Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have any false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, in her ignorance.

Thus is the historical clay of this story transformed into an image of the human spirit in conflict with itself, into an image of self-discovery. The so-called Southern myth is used to greater ends. And when we read "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," we see how Miranda's hopefulness leads her to an immense betrayal and anguish in strictly twentieth-century terms. The South has dissolved as historical background. Well, that's putting it too strongly, perhaps; what I mean is that it doesn't really matter in what particular geographical-political-social situation one discovers that one's family and society have based their values on lies — certainly there have been groups and periods in all countries of the Western world in which this has happened. What matters for art and literature is that the individual human experience of it (the emotional and moral suffering that it causes) be rendered in a form which makes it perceivable. And that Miss Porter does in this story.

"Pale Horse, Pale Rider" was published in 1939 — a fateful year in modern world history that certainly must have recalled for her the experiences she had as a newspaper reporter for the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver during the First World War. Since most of her creative life has, in fact, been bracketed between the two wars, and since she has often described herself as a "liberal and a pacifist," we can well imagine what her response was to the world events swirling about her. In a preface to a new edition of *Flowering Judas*, dated June 21, 1940, she wrote:

To any speculation from interested sources as to why there were not more of them (stories), I can answer simply and truthfully that I was not one of those who could flourish in the conditions of the past two decades . . . We none of us flourished in those times, artists or not, for art, like the human life of which it is the truest voice, thrives best by daylight in a green and growing world. For

myself, and I was not alone, all the conscious and recollected years of my life have been lived to this day under the heavy threat of world catastrophe, and most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of those threats, to trace them to their sources, and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world. In the face of such shape and weight of present misfortune, the voice of the individual artist may seem perhaps of no more consequence than the whirring of a cricket in the grass; but the arts do live continuously and they live literally by faith . . . they outlive governments and creeds and the societies, even the very civilizations that produced them.

Perhaps William Faulkner's Nobel Prize speech is a more eloquent testimony of faith, but this is certainly eloquent — and notice that it comes from one who does not stand aloof from the terrors of modern history and yet creates an art which she insists must stand aloof. Thus, Harry J. Mooney is surely wrong in attempting to pin down such a story as "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" with a political-social tag, even though it is manifestly concerned with political-social problems. In this story we see Miranda again, a young woman employed by a Midwestern newspaper during World War I. She hates the jingoism of the War Bond drives, doesn't believe that the Huns committed atrocities in Belgium and Holland, refuses to believe that God takes sides in wars — and besides she is too underpaid at \$18 per week to contribute, even if not paying does mean the loss of her job. She meets a soldier, has a few brief days of genuine love, and succumbs to the flu epidemic. The soldier risks contamination by tenderly caring for her until she is hospitalized. Finally, after a long struggle marked by magnificently evoked nightmares, she survives only to discover that the soldier has in the meantime died of influenza, presumably contracted from her . . . and the armistice is being celebrated by jubilant crowds in the streets.

Adam, she said, now you need not die again, but still I wish you were here, I wish you had come back; what do you think I came back for, Adam, to be deceived like this?

At once he was there beside her, invisible but urgently present, a ghost but more alive than she was, the last intolerable cheat of her heart; for knowing it was false, she still clung to the lie, the unpardonable lie of her bitter desire. She said, "I love you" and stood up trembling, trying by the mere act of her will to bring him to sight before her. If I could call you up from the grave, I would, she said; if I could see your ghost, I would say, I believe . . . "I believe," she said aloud. "Oh, let me see you once more." The room was silent, empty, the shade was gone from it, struck away by the sudden violence of her rising and speaking aloud. She came to herself as if out of sleep. Oh, no, that is not the way, I must never do that, she warned herself. Miss Tanner said, "Your taxicab is waiting, my dear," and there was Mary. Ready to go.

No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead, cold light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything.

"Now there would be time for everything" is as bitterly ironical as the ending of "Old Mortality." And it risks sentimentalism as much as the ending of Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, but in the total context of a hard, bitter, truthful story it emerges far more successfully than Hemingway's as a genuine, honest experience of loss and despair. No doubt it emerged from Miss Porter's own experience of World War I, but that — as a famous character of American fiction once said — is merely personal. And the art work transcends the merely personal as it does the merely historical.

I have said that Katherine Anne Porter is a master of embedded symbolism. Nowhere is this more clearly evident than in one of her most famous stories, "Flowering Judas." In this complex story (as impossible to render in summary as any fine work of art) we see Laura — who might well have been named Miranda — a convent-bred schoolteacher in Mexico who associates with the revolutionaries, but is unable to give herself fully to God, or Love, or Social Justice: she merely flirts with them all. The big, blustery revolutionary general, Braggioni, to whom Laura says no as she does to all commitments, is a magnificently-drawn character. But Laura, being more complex, is a greater achievement. She had delivered some drugs to Eugenio, a revolutionary who is a political prisoner of the government, and he used the drugs to commit suicide. The story ends with Laura's guilt-ridden, hallucinatory dream full of powerful symbolism:

Laura takes off her serge dress and puts on a white linen night-gown and goes to bed. She turns her head a little to one side and, lying still, reminds herself that it is time to sleep. Numbers tick in her brain like little clocks, soundless doors close of themselves around her. If you would sleep, you must not remember anything; the little children will say tomorrow, good morning, my teacher, the poor prisoners who come every day to bring flowers to their jailor. 1-2-3-4-5- it is monstrous to confuse love with revolution, night with day, life with death — ah Eugenio!

The tolling of the midnight bell is a signal, but what does it mean? Get up, Laura, and follow me: come out of your sleep, out of your bed, out of this strange house. What are you doing in this house? Without a word, without fear, she rose and reached for Eugenio's hand, but he eluded her with a sharp, sly smile and drifted away. This is not all, you shall see — Murderer, he said, follow me, I will show you a new country, but it is far away and we must hurry. No, said Laura, not unless you take my hand, no; and she clung first to the stair rail and then to the topmost branch of the Judas tree that bent down slowly and set her upon the earth and then to the rocky edge of a cliff, and then to the jagged wave of a sea that was not water but a desert of crumbling stone. "Where are you tak-

ing me?" she asked in wonder but without fear. "To death, and it is a long way off, and we must hurry," said Eugenio. "No," said Laura, "not unless you take my hand." "Then eat these flowers, poor prisoner," said Eugenio in a voice of pity, "take and eat": and from the Judas tree he stripped the warm bleeding flowers and held them to her lips. She saw that his hand was fleshless, a cluster of small white petrified branches and his eye sockets were without light, but she ate the flowers greedily, for they satisfied both hunger and thirst. "Murderer!" said Eugenio, and "Cannibal! This is my body and my blood!" Laura cried, "No!" and at the sound of her own voice, she awoke trembling and was afraid to sleep again.

This is as fine a passage of poetry as can be found in fiction anywhere. And its meaning derives from the total context of the story; when Eugenio says "This is my body and my blood" and Laura says "No!" at least three levels of interpretation are possible: Eugenio is being rejected as a revolutionist, or as a Christ figure, or as lover. Ray B. West overstresses the religious element of the story when he says, "(Laura) is, like Judas, the betrayer; and her betrayal, like his, consisted in an inability to believe. Without faith she is incapable of passion, thence of love, finally of life itself." But nowhere in Miss Porter's fiction do we ever find that life, love, or passion must be based upon religious faith. In "Flowering Judas" the failures to commit oneself to a social cause or to a church is merely a symbolic analogue of the failure to commit oneself to human love. And it is the feeling of anguish at the realization of failure to love, of emotional and spiritual aridity, that is so powerfully embodied in that magnificent conclusion.

Two stories best exemplify the existentialist motive in Miss Porter's fiction: "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" and her latest published story, "Holiday," which appeared in *The Atlantic*, December, 1960.

Once, twenty years before, Lydia Weatherall had prepared for death and it hadn't come. Now, although she is in her eighties, it comes when she isn't quite ready for it — she hasn't yet put her affairs in order, hasn't finished the altar cloth for the church or sent the wine to Sister Borgia, hasn't changed her will, and perhaps most important of all hasn't removed from the attic the love letters from her first fiancé, George, and those from her husband. She refuses to admit that there is anything seriously wrong with her, even though "the forked green vein danced" on her forehead and her eyelids twitched. Her perceptions are grossly faulty; the bones within her and the people about her seem to float. Her hearing vacillates; it requires a focusing effort for her to realize that the sounds she hears are not leaves rustling or newspapers swishing, but her daughter Cornelia whispering with the doctor.

Granny Weatherall has truly "weathered all" — all but the end of life itself, and in this exquisitely shaped story we see her family achieving the "all." There remains, however, one final painful disillusionment, the ultimate jilting, to be experienced. For sixty years she had prayed against two things: against remembering that her first fiancé had left her on her wedding day and "against losing her soul in the deep pit of hell." And now both her prayers fail her. She had been jilted by George and had weathered

that by a successful marriage that helped bury the memory; but now she is jilted by God. The priest comes to administer extreme unction, and she thinks, again no bridegroom, and the priest in the house. And this jilting she will never forgive.

The story is magnificently structured. All the lines of force — the realization that she is dying, the memory of her first jilting, and the final awareness of the endless darkness to come — move toward a single, quietly powerful climax. The story progresses from day to night, from light to dark, from hope to despair, from life to death.

The implicit theme seems to be that the universe has no order, the proper bridegroom, human or spiritual, never comes: to expect him will inevitably lead to cruel disillusionment. Perhaps it is possible to live, however, as Granny Weatherall has done, a full, rich life with a substitute, a human adjustment with human love that can compensate for the lack of an ideal or a divine one.

But not all critics share this view of "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." In fact, the most recent critique — "Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter" by James Wendell Johnson — interprets her as a thoroughly bleak, pessimistic Existentialist. Johnson is persuasive, but wrong. Katherine Anne Porter faces squarely the absurdity of the universe, but she does not collapse into hopelessness. For example, what more appealing symbol of doom could there be for a bleak pessimist than the atom bomb? Yet, writing on that subject just a few years ago, Miss Porter was far from gloomy, although hardly cheerful:

If dropping the atom bomb is an immoral act, then the making of it was too; and the writing of the formula was a crime, since those who wrote it must have known what such a contrivance was good for. So, morally speaking, the bomb is only a magnified hand grenade, and the crime, if crime it is, is still murder. It was never anything else. Our first protocriminal, then, was the man who first struck fire from flint, for from that moment on we have been coming steadily to this day and this weapon and this use of it. What would you have advised instead? That the human race should have gone on sitting in caves, gnawing raw meat, and beating each other over the head with the bones?

It may be that what we have is a world not on the verge of flying apart, but an uncreated one — still in shapeless fragments waiting to be put together properly. I imagine that when we want something better, we may have it: at perhaps no greater price than we have already paid for the worse.

Does that sound to you like the imagination of a woman with a gloomy outlook on life?

But Miss Porter's latest short story, "Holiday," forces a readjustment of perspective and reveals her tragic outlook in a new light. Like many first person narratives, this is a double story: it is a richly detailed, naturalistic account of German peasant life in the remote plains of Texas, and it is the epiphany experience of a troubled young woman who goes there to escape

certain undefined personal troubles, but gains instead a profound insight into the human condition. The unnamed narrator seeks the advice of a former schoolmate about an inexpensive place for a spring holiday and receives an enthusiastic description of the Muller farm. Her friend, however, was famous for "amusing stories that did not turn grim on you until a little while later, when by chance you saw and heard for yourself." Such phrasing understates the grimness of the experience she is about to have. She arrives at "the sodden platform of a country station" and is taken by buckboard through "soaked brown fields" along "scanty leafless woods" to "the gaunt and aching ugliness" of a farmhouse where she is to occupy the attic room. Her gloomy forebodings are dissipated when she shakes hands with each member (except one) of the bustling, energetic Muller family as they stream out of the house for their evening chores. "These were solid, practical, hard-bitten, landholding German peasants who stuck their mattocks into the deep earth and held fast wherever they were, because to them life and the land were one indivisible thing . . ."

They included the patriarchal Father Muller, who reads *Das Kapital*, refuses "to pay a preacher goot money to talk his nonsense," and who invariably wins at chess; strong-boned Mother Muller, who is worshipped by her children; three sons — Hans, Fritz, and one unnamed; three daughters — Annetje, Gretchen, and Huldah (Hatsie); two sons-in-law, soon to be joined by a third; and eight grandchildren all under the age of ten. As the narrator's friend had said, "everybody was so healthy and good-hearted" and the narrator becomes absorbed by "the hysterical inertia of their minds in the midst of this muscular life." She is sure that "there could be nothing here more painful than what I had left," but she does not reckon with Otilie, "a crippled and badly deformed servant girl," a mute whose "whole body was maimed in some painful, mysterious way."

The movement of the story becomes a rhythmic counterpoint between the sequence of marriage, birth, and death in the Muller family and the gradually increasing intensity and intimacy of the narrator's relations with Otilie. The more she becomes absorbed with the vital, elemental family life, the more she forgets her old troubles; but the more she gets to know Otilie, the closer she comes to a staggering realization of a fundamental truth of life. At her first supper with the family she notices Otilie: "No one moved aside for her, or spoke to her, or even glanced after her when she vanished into the kitchen" after serving the meal. And like everyone else, she too soon ignores Otilie. After a *Turnverein* dance, it is announced that Hatsie will be married the following Sunday. There is a tremendous wedding at which Otilie served the guests. "Her face was a brown smudge of anxiety, her eyes were wide and dazed. Her uncertain hands rattled among the pans, but nothing could make her seem real, or in any way connected with the life around her."

But the next morning, Otilie does a remarkable thing: she pulls the narrator by the sleeve to her dingy, bitter-smelling, windowless room and produces a faded yellow photograph of a pretty smiling, five-year-old German girl — Otilie. And the narrator realizes that Otilie is a member of the family. "For an instant some filament, lighter than cobweb, spun itself out between that living center in her and in me, a filament from some center that

held us all bound to our inescapable, common source, so that her life and mine were kin, even a part of each other, and the painfulness and strangeness of her vanished." For some time thereafter, the narrator suffers a tortured perplexity as she observes the family, so kind to each other and even to the animals about the farm, remaining indifferent to their own flesh in the horribly grotesque and misshapen Ottolie. She even wishes that Ottolie might die at once rather than keep on cooking and serving for that cruelly insensitive family. But gradually she adjusts and even comes to see that the Mullers "with a deep right instinct had learned to live with her disaster on its own terms."

A lesser artist would have ended the story there, but Katherine Anne Porter continues to tighten the tension to a tremendous burst of insight. Sometime later, Gretchen bears a child, but a storm cuts short the celebrations. Lightning, thunderbolts, and flood assault the farm, driving the entire family into heroic efforts at salvaging goods and chattels. The mother, who had hoisted a calf to the hayloft and milked the cows in the rising water, collapses and dies, as the weeping father shouts, "A hundert thousand tollars in the bank . . . and tell me, tell, what goot does it?" Two days later the neighbors join the muddy procession to the cemetery, as the narrator lies numbly in her attic room. In a half-sleep she hears the howling of a dog, goes to the kitchen to discover that it is Ottolie, who apparently longs to join the mother's funeral procession. The narrator manages to harness a pony to a dilapidated wagon and tries to take Ottolie through the churned mud to the cemetery. At this human gesture of communion with her, Ottolie "gave a choked little whimper, and suddenly she laughed out, a kind of yelp but unmistakably laughter, and clapped her hands for joy, the grinning mouth and suffering eyes turned to the sky." But the narrator realizes that it is hopeless either to try to get to the cemetery or to expect that the ceremony there at its concomitant family unity could possibly include Ottolie, and she turns back. "Ottolie was beyond my reach as well as any other human reach, and yet had I not come nearer to her than I had to anyone else . . . ? Well, we were both equally the fools of life, equally fellow fugitives from death."

The meaning of "Holiday" is exactly that of all the fiction of Albert Camus, although it might be added that as an artist, Miss Porter is as superior to Camus as she is his inferior as an eloquent philosopher. It is simply this: man lives in a universe without shape or meaning. He is therefore obligated to project a meaning, to shape and form his own life in an effort that is ultimately doomed, since it will end with death and chaos. But while he is making the effort, he can be sustained by love — even love for a twisted, mute half-beast of a human being like Ottolie. Since we are all prisoners of the universe together, let us love one another.



“Maria Concepcion”: Life among the Ruins

● James Hafley

Asked by Blackwood, her publisher, about her first novel, George Eliot “refused to tell my story beforehand, on the ground that I would not have it judged apart from my *treatment*, which alone determines the moral quality of art.” Katherine Anne Porter might very well have said the same thing of her first finished short story, “*Maria Concepcion*,” an excellent example of how meaning in fiction is often most closely related not to plot or to objects but to achieved verbal form: what language makes as it realizes substance. The events of this story are, when abstracted, misleading because merely potential: a young girl’s equally young husband deserts her for another girl, with whom he goes off to war; when they return, his wife murders her rival and manages to be protected by her husband, who returns to her, and by her entire village; she also takes possession of the rival’s child by her husband, which compensates her for the child she herself had lost shortly after its birth while her husband was away. Those events are made to mean something like this: even among the ruins, even in ignorance or in spite of religious and social authority, man finds — is shown by life itself — his human duty and embraces its destruction of whatever in him defies it. How and why this assertion is made by these events constitutes the art of the story; but it is the art, not the potential situation (sequence) or abstracted sense (consequence), that is the story itself, the “work.” Sequence is historical; consequence is perhaps philosophical; “*Maria Concepcion*” is, simply, words in pattern, and most pertinently examined as such. I should like to consider, therefore, some of the ways in which pattern makes facts mean in this short story.

All the people of this story save one are Mexican Indian primitives; literally beneath them lies a sophisticated cultural past, “the buried city,” “the lost city of their ancestors”: it is their source of income — nearly all the village’s workingmen have been hired by the American archaeologist, Givens, to uncover it — but otherwise it does not interest them; and they much prefer the clay pots and figures made by themselves (which also provide them with money because of foreigners) to the broken ones of their predecessors, of “no good use on earth,” in which Givens takes “unearthly delight.” For the natives the past culture is, like its artifacts, “wornout.” Around them are two other strata of articulated culture: social and religious. But these might for all practical purposes be buried too. The state is alien, corrupt, and subject to paroxysms of vague revolution; and the Catholic Church is completely misunderstood as a mode of order by people for whom it does little more than afford a mixture of colorful status-giving ceremony and polite — as distinct from pagan — superstition. The primitives, then,

do not live by their own past, or by a nationalistic or Christian present. How, in view of this, do they live? In an age, at a level, when civilized modes of order do not obtain, what is the alternative to chaos? Clearly, these people get money from their past, importance from their religion, a certain sham respectability from their military-social authorities. Just as clearly, by living and in the service of "life itself," they find through something like human instinct rudimentary forms of what might perhaps one day grow into the basis for a new sophistication: the family must be protected; immature pleasure must yield to the propagation and protection of humankind; the dead must bury their own dead.

A basic way in which the story says that primitive man's own resinous heart furnishes him with modes of conduct essentially like those sanctioned by civilized cultures is through its arrangement of words, then images, pertaining to walking. Walking is usually towards life; paths (permitting ordered modes of movement) simplify attainment of goals; but running or swerving constitute excesses. The story begins "Maria Concepcion walked carefully, keeping to the middle of the white dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus had not gathered so profusely." A primitive road, but with a pragmatic, temperate "middle" to be followed. She would like to rest; but she walks, "with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented." One sees that "free" and "natural" are accompanied by "guarded": even the primitive must be on guard to be natural. Maria recalls, as she walks, how "she and Juan walked together up to the altar" to be married in church. Then, when she has "dabbled her feet in the water," she decides to have some honey from the hives of Maria Rosa. For her, the honey is an exceptional treat justified by her pregnancy; for Maria Rosa it is a way of life; and Maria Concepcion now finds her husband committing himself to that way. Appropriately, we first see the rival as "Maria Rosa ran," among beehives and through bushes; and "Juan Villegas ran after her." When he catches her, they "moved back through the hives of honeycomb." Maria, stunned, nevertheless "found herself walking onward, keeping the road without knowing it, feeling her way delicately . . . Her careful sense of duty kept her moving." And though "she wished to sit down quietly and wait for her death . . . she kept moving" to rectify the disorder, for conception must triumph over the rose.

Givens — and his name perhaps suggests that he needn't forge for himself a mode of order from the present — moves up and down in the ruined city, rather than back and forth: he can afford to occupy himself with the past, though his condescending attitude towards the primitive reveals finally his inability really to understand life. He is part of the world of death, at least for his workers. "Givens liked his Indians best when he could feel a fatherly indulgence for their primitive childish ways." Yet he, for whom everything has been "given" by his shaped culture, is in a way the real child, playing with toys and marveling that Maria can slit the throats of the fowl in the service of life, just as she will later slit Maria Rosa's throat. An excited explorer of the past, he has lost touch with the present.

When Juan and Rosa go off to war, they "march." This is not so much living order as destructive regimentation; the order of the family and the village will outlast it. When they return and Juan is apprehended, Maria Rosa, "lean as a wolf," is described as "falling on her face in the road." She is then carried home. Juan, meanwhile, is "limping" as he enters prison, then "walked out" when Givens ransoms him. He expects to go on "walking," but after too much to drink in the "Death and Resurrection" saloon, he makes a mistake and, "having taken leave of his balance," returns to his own home rather than to Maria Rosa. His wife then "stood her ground and resisted" him, so that he "stepped back" and "dropped amiably."

Now Maria must act to save her marriage and the pattern of her life. She gives up, at first, her usual mode of movement; she is to become, really, a sort of Judas, but a Judas that paradoxically will itself flower in resurrection through the death of the rose. (Thus, in fact, the title of Porter's volume comments upon situations in each of its stories.) "She fumbled and tangled the bits of cord in her haste, and set off across plowed fields instead of taking the accustomed road. She ran." Then, before her panic gives way to plot, "she sat down quietly under a sheltering thorny bush . . . in deadly silence and immobility . . . her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the time of rains." But "after a great while she stood up and set out walking again." She must live, and so her rival — whom, we are told, she herself had once exactly resembled in her response to Juan — must die instead.

After the murder, she adopts the passive role of wife; confronting Juan, she "got down on her knees, crawling toward him as he had seen her crawl many times toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa." Like another heroine with whom she might at first be thought to have nothing in common — like James's Maggie Verver — Maria has deliberately put aside her religion, earlier so important to her, to save her marriage by a desperate remedy. "Falling forward upon her face," she confesses to him. And this act of hers forces him into the manhood he has thus far avoided. Now he "supported her, . . . he held her . . . her feet folded under her"; and fearful that she may be "dragged away," he acts so as to bring this pattern to its crux: "He stood up and dragged her up with him." She has now grown "invaluable, a woman without equal among a million women" to him, because her paradoxical crime has forced him to see the meaning of his role as her husband, which in turn illuminates for him the way to his own mature fulfillment in duty. True to each other, they must, serving life, now lie to everyone else: for as Maria Concepcion had, in her moments of indetermination before the murder, been sitting "with her rebozo over her head," but at the moment of decision "threw the rebozo off her face," now it is Maria Rosa, suggesting the undisciplined and chaotic life, whose dead body lies beneath a rose-colored rebozo. Like those of the woman in Stevens's "Emperor of Ice-Cream," and with obvious relevance, it is her feet that show how cold she is, and dumb: "the feet, jutting up thinly, the small scarred soles protruding, freshly washed, a mass of crooked, half-healed wounds, thorn-pricks and cuts of sharp stones." There has been no path for Maria Rosa; consequently she is dead — like Maria Concepcion's dead child "mere stone" — and thus not to be feared. "Even the

restless light could not give a look of life to that fixed countenance." (Certainly Porter was thinking of Stevens's poem). "Maria Rosa had eaten too much honey and had had too much love. Now she must sit in hell." Even old Lupe, the medicine woman and Rosa's godmother too, protects life against death by lying to the authorities: "I do not see well. I cannot hurry my feet. I know no enemy of Maria Rosa." "She could have ruined that Maria Concepcion with a word, but it was even sweeter to make fools of these gendarmes who went about spying on honest people." The paradox of the lie focuses itself finally as she refuses to identify the "footfalls" she has heard. She suggests only that they were caused by "the spirit of evil," and thus thrills her audience. And so "Maria Concepcion felt herself guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were around her . . . the forces of life were ranged invincibly with her against the beaten dead." And as she leaves, her friends "made way" for her. Before the images of contented nature and life that conclude the story, there is a look at Juan: "he must descend into the trenches of the buried city as Maria Rosa must go into her grave . . . there was no way out of it now . . . he could scarcely guide his feet." He needn't, in one sense, any longer: his way is plainly marked for him; his wife's action has caused him to define his significant self but thereby has killed his rose-and-honey bachelor independence forever; similarly Maria Concepcion has by killing Rosa put to death her own childhood.

The thorn image, which from the first sentence has accompanied that of the path or way, extends itself quite naturally to the knife image here; and it is ambivalent: if thorn and knife are unpleasant to experience, they can be meaningful and helpful — ways as the path is a way — to use. Thorn and knife destroy but also defend. Thus, Maria's house has "a wall of organ cactus enclosing it on the side nearest to the road"; and Rosa's house is surrounded by a "thick hedge of cactus that sheered up nakedly, like bared knife blades set protectingly around the small clearing"; it is through a "gap in the wall opening on the road" that Maria spies her husband and her rival at love-making. The trenches of the buried city, too, are described as "orderly gashes of a giant scalpel": Givens cuts into the past as Maria does into the present, and both have as goal the enrichment of man: Maria's ever-present butchering knife furthers the human cause by killing the stupefied fowl and the rival who "has no right to live." Indeed, the painful description of those agonized fowl as they are carried to slaughter surely suggests that a degree of the same horrible necessity is present in their being killed as is present in Rosa's.

After Maria's act of murder, her husband washes the knife carefully just as she washes herself; he "threw the water wide of the doorway" and she "did likewise with the bowl in which she had bathed." Remembering also the freshly washed feet of the dead Maria Rosa, one feels the ritual quality of this bathing and, again, the dangerous necessity of the sacrificial knife. Also, "that sheltering wall" which Maria's friends "cast impenetrably around her" after the inquest brings to mind the wall of cactus knife blades set about the houses. The paradox of the knife-thorn complex thus is assimilated into the murder of Maria Rosa and informs that act with its own ambivalent meaning. And the interdependence of nature and human nature asserted by thorns like

knives modulates through a final, different image into the harmony of the story's conclusion: as Maria Concepcion takes Maria Rosa's son from the coffin — he is truly hers, as she says, because he is future human life and must not be left to immaturity and death — her friends do not speak, but "an approving nod, a bare breath of complete agreement, stirred among them." That is the breath of all life, the breath permeating the last paragraph: "Maria Concepcion could hear Juan's breathing . . . She breathed, too . . . each inspiration saturating her with repose. The child's light, faint breath was a mere shadowy moth of sound in the silver air. The night, the earth under her (one recalls the buried city) seemed to swell and recede together with a limitless, unhurried, benign breathing. She drooped and closed her eyes, feeling the slow rise and fall within her own body. She did not know what it was, but it eased her all through." It is the breath, the spirit, of life, and as she falls asleep, her last awareness is of a "a strange, wakeful happiness." As primitive she walks and cuts and breathes with the earth; but not quite entirely with it: she has taken care to be married in church, which is to say that she has, with however primitive a perception, defended values special for *human* nature, though by means in themselves violent and seemingly inhumane. With her marriage she ceased to be a Maria Rosa; with her murder she forced Juan to cease being a corresponding immature male, so that he will no longer require Givens's rescuing him from childish scrapes; she is, as she was at the outset, "entirely contented," and the "ease" at the end of the story is like the "ease" of her walk at the start, a "free, natural, guarded ease": her "instinctive serenity" and ease are those of nature, but her safeguards and resulting pride are those of human nature.

Thus far we have been looking at "Maria Concepcion" as if it were an art-work *déagré*; yet, though its art is, I should think, most certainly *déagré*, its meaning is evidently thought of as *engagé* by Katherine Anne Porter, who has been several times at pains to insist upon herself as an artist *engagé*; her "Introduction" to the 1940 edition of *Flowering Judas* is such an insistence. Confessing that she had "no notion of what their meaning might be to such readers as they would find," she nonetheless goes on to describe the stories as achievements "in the way of order and form and statements in a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society when the world was heaving in the sickness of a millenial change." Art, she feels, "thrives best by daylight in a green and growing world." That is interesting; it may perhaps suggest a sentimental type of historical consciousness, as may her judgment in the remark that "most of the energies of my mind and spirit have been spent in the effort to grasp the meaning of . . . threats (of world catastrophe), to trace them to their sources and to understand the logic of this majestic and terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world." The artist, she says, has a right so to spend his energies, because the arts "are what we find again when the ruins are cleared away": they are "the substance of faith," by which one supposes her to mean — somewhat like Conrad and Faulkner — faith in humanity's power to triumph over opposing circumstance.

As a short story *engagé*, "Maria Concepcion" — and one does well to remember that it opens *Flowering Judas* — seems at first clear enough: the

war; the ruined and buried civilization; the return to primitivism after cultural collapse; the monstrous if momentary disarrangements by which human responsibility may at times try to assert itself — those motifs seem pretty easily accountable for as reflecting the problems and ideas of an intensely socially-conscious woman writing in the most popular literary form during the great depression following World War I. Yet there seems to be a strange, even amusing, disparity between the author's statements in her introduction and the story's statement. "The ruins are cleared away" there by Givens, and he does find the arts — "small clay heads and bits of pottery and fragments of painted walls" — but that language for the arts doesn't suppose a great deal. The walls suggest the "open painted coffin" in which Maria Rosa lies; the pottery is in "bits"; the heads are "small." Givens's "unearthly delight" in these things is no means for solution of the vital problems in the story — what he does solve is superficial, and he solves it with money. We are, it appears, no more justified in attributing his shortcomings to his being American than we are in supposing that only Mexican Indians have Maria's will for life. Again, the story ends not with "terrible failure" but with success — terrible, too, indirectly, but nonetheless success. Life, not art, is in the story the substance of faith; and the story says that life beats death, however clumsily it may sometimes do so. In short, the author's remarks glorify art and see Western man's life as a failure; the story rather pushes art aside — art and science — and sees man innately competent to build human order over and above whatever ruins he may have survived.

If, however, someone guided by the "Introduction" were to read this story as a drama of events rather than a drama of words, he could easily enough construe a sense of it in harmony with the author's personal statement, so that both would be *engagé* in exactly the same manner. After all, at the center of the events is a shocking murder; ergo, man is simply a wild animal. Givens, consecrated to his unearthly delights, has failed in his moral responsibility to the Indians towards whom he nevertheless wishes to take a fatherly attitude; ergo, America or technology or traditionalists or the artist *dégagé* or all of these have failed man in the Western world. The heads and pottery and so forth do, then, seem all that survives: broken images from a time before this terrible failure. The fact of Maria's escape from conviction and punishment for her crime might seem the last bitter dose of comment on the failure. Considering that the story deals with primitives, how tempting to recall the author's words about "the meaning of . . . threats" and threats traced "to their sources." In an archetypal situation with primitives, one could say, the author has shown the religious, political, social, and moral causes of the collapse of Western man; the ruined city, save for its art, would be an exact correlative for the ruined village, the ruined world, above it.

Well, one could easily make a much more thorough and convincing misreading in that way; but I shall desist, since the whole point is that it would be as fatuous as it would be easy. This story, though, is a very good one for reading and then deliberately misreading: when you have read it according to the "Introduction," you have, really, accounted for everything except Porter's treatment — the treatment you yourself have provided. It would be difficult to find a better example than this story, with its abstraced events

so obviously chargeable with conventional meanings totally opposed to their true ones here, of the fact that in much literature the event is, as I have said earlier, given its meaning by the very words in which, and as which, it occurs.

One might balk at William Troy's feeling that "if Miss Porter had written nothing but ("Maria Concepcion" and "The Cracked Looking-Glass") she would still be among the most distinguished masters of her craft in this country." The proud achievement of Joyce's short stories in *Dubliners* suggests that Porter was primarily a brilliant pupil, requiring more than two stories to establish her mastery; and in fact the sentimental sensibility, just a little like Katherine Mansfield's, everywhere apparent in her non-fiction, requires artistic discipline by means of a certain almost precious caution that causes her stories to suffer somewhat in comparison with those of, say, Eudora Welty; yet nevertheless she has given us many fine examples of fiction in which, as in Joyce's, the word not only recounts but also accounts for and thus transforms the event.

Foe

• Mother Mary Anthony, S.H.C.J.

That crow in the rain hunches, heaves, achieves
Flap-flight, is treed and raucous, meagre though
The misappropriated seed as thieves
Burdens go. Like his raven cousin Poe
Met, bird in so human seeming a gloom
And peevish, and like other unscared crows
Unwelcome, this one mars fruit, stifles bloom,
Ungardens waysides with his beak and toes.
And from tilled Eden's man soil can he pluck
The growth? One did, once: progenitor to
Winged dragon, and bringer of all bad luck,
But hardly bird — with leather feathers you
Would seem absurd. Still, what's securely planted
We never can afford to take for granted.

Winter Term

● Claude F. Koch

i

It was late in the day, much too late in the day for this. Wren talked with the habitual precision of long experience. He could not but be precise—even though he might be uncertain concerning what he was precise about (that thought intruded too, while the fine quicksilver blade of wintry light cut with as much precision and inadvertence through the Georgian windows of Bentley and, retarded slightly by the form of the young man before him, fell serenely and mercilessly across his desk and twisted in his heart). It said blandly enough, in the casual way of the world, "You, my dear Dr. Wren, have reached the end of the line." Behind him the change had been made on the door for Marriot: *Professor* Marriot now, if you please. *Associate Professor* Wren remained undisturbed; one could not see clearly through the frosted pane of the door—he hoped that *he* was as opaque as the glass behind the name.

Then he became aware, as of springtime bees across a flower, that he had better take care; for this insistent young man who *would* sit at his feet at 4:30 on a winter's afternoon was squinting with the polite bewilderment of the well-bred young man who noticed too much. One would not smile that a poet had mastered the colloquial. Wren tightened his lips.

"But he has, you see. The syllabic count is exact, the meter is unvaried—yet the line is limpid and flexible,

and colloquial. He is successful beyond one's wildest dreams."

"I felt that, sir. I felt it too; but I couldn't put my finger on it. I thought it was the tone." There was no denying the intelligence in the face; nor the unfawning deliberation of the voice which placed a salutary break on the usual undergraduate enthusiasm when (how rarely) the instructor's mind and the student's mind met on a nice point.

"The tone as well, of course," Dr. Wren nodded. He shifted slightly to guard his eyes from the light. "It's all of a piece." But then wasn't everything? I just can't put my finger on it, he thought. He felt as though he had been kicked, but he could not quite localize the blow. The room was still, with the ambiguous deliberation of late February days, waiting for the winds that would sweep a number of things away, gathering now in some near latitude beyond the Pennsylvania hills that ringed St. Andrews. One would hear them soon, bending the elms against the windows of Bentley. It had excited him twenty years ago. Why didn't the young man go?

But he was speaking, and Wren resisted the impulse to nod, simply because he was not listening, and he hardly thought it worth while to be caught in a deception of *any* kind. And yet, had not his daughter caught him this very morning?

I'm sorry, Daddy.

I don't know what you mean, Dierdre.

The young man's voice was sound

enough to suggest their own, yet soft enough not to intrude.

He is a very good teacher, Daddy, but he cannot deserve more than you. And "Derry" would be simply confirming what he already knew. She was Marriot's student now; that, certainly, the college had assured him for her: an education when she was not housekeeping for him. The thought was maudlin and out of keeping with the dispassionate, premonitory edge of light. He shifted farther back against the wall. The young man's voice came temporarily through: "next year," he was saying.

I have not complained, Dierdre; I don't think I am particularly affected . . .

Yes, Daddy. She had wrapped the scarf about his throat and kissed him, standing on tiptoe quite as her mother would do. Perhaps he had *not* been affected; that is, not disastrously so—until he actually saw the lettering on the door: the freshness of it (perhaps vulgar) against the slightly flaked paint of his own.

"I am sorry, Turner. What were you saying?"

Joseph Turner, that was it—and Ruskin had helped establish his namesake, far back through literary generations. Turner's eyes widened a fraction, enough perhaps to glimpse behind them something of what the young so successfully hid.

"Are you tired, sir? Perhaps I should come back tomorrow?"

"No, I'm not tired. I was, in fact, thinking of tomorrow, in a way. But you were speaking of next year?"

"Yes, sir. I was saying that I'm applying for an assistantship at the University for next year—Pennsylvania, that is; and I hoped I might have your recommendation." There was no shadow of doubt in the young

man's face. "I must have the forms filled out and at the office of the dean of the graduate school before March fifteenth."

"You hope to teach?"

Turner chewed for a moment at his lip. "Frankly, Dr. Wren, about this I am not quite sure." His face was in profile, a finely-shaped face, slightly soft at the edges—like the head on an ancient coin, worn smooth by handling. Too much rubbing together: "Let's rub ideas together," that was Marriot's phrase. When they were both young, it had sounded exciting; Jeff Marriot was always exciting.

He stood deliberately, impelled to observe Turner in the harsher light. He walked, stooped and meditative, before the respectful yet self-contained gaze of the young man, to the window. How precise the lines of the elms, how candid and unmerciful the sharp edges of bricked path and retaining wall. The bare branches were unstirring; a single unfriendly light marked acutely the window of Dean Lange's office in Stowe across the Quad. He turned. The young man was looking at the door. It was interestingly true: in this light the face had perceptibly sharper edges. A fine-looking young man who, in twenty years or so on some February afternoon, might be feeling the edge of the knife, or wielding one. Not for a moment that Jeff Marriot would use a knife (or could)—a joke perhaps, an innocent uncalculated joke would do as well. Jokes, like life, could accumulate—were cumulative.

"Well now, Turner. What are your other prospects?"

"The service, Dr. Wren. I'll have my R.O.T.C. commission. I have thought seriously of that. I do"—he cleared his throat—"I do hope to

marry. I am attracted to some degree by the military life. Of course, if I get the fellowship, it will be decided for me. The choice must seem incongruous to you, sir."

"I can't say that it does," Dr. Wren said dryly.

"When I said that I am not quite sure"—Turner's eyes widened again and his voice became slightly stiff, as though he were filling a formal report—"I meant that I might not really be cut out for it. What I mean, sir, if . . . well, you must be at it for some time before you know. Isn't that so?"

Wren met his eyes for a full minute before replying. There was no guile in them. "That is so, Turner."

"Well," the young man moved his hand tentatively toward the inside pocket of his jacket, "may I, sir . . . ?"

"Of course. Leave the form there. I'll get it off tonight."

"I am grateful to you, sir." Standing, he seemed younger, more buoyant, poised with the potential spring of a skilled runner. "May I say that this course has helped decide me? That is," he smiled with engaging friendliness, "that is . . . it's helped narrow my range of decision."

There was a dampness at his back, and Dr. Wren diverted his attention to the drapes. He pulled them and stepped away from the window.

"Thank you, Turner. Watch the door. It has just been painted." He crossed in front of the young man and turned the knob. "There," he said.

"Oh? I see. Good-by, sir. Thank you again."

Wren watched him down the hall, a fine springing step, concerned with his own affairs. Then Dr. Wren moved back, leaning fastidiously away from the painted surface, and closed the door behind him.

Perhaps tomorrow *would* be better. One could grow used to anything, and this (to put it shrilly) was simply the long dying, the moment of defeat that every man awaited, got over, forgot—as one adjusted to and forgot the permanent disability, the near-sightedness, the crippled limb. But that would hardly do as analogy when one remembered Jeff Marriot's limp. Professor Wren leaned across Turner's application on his desk and switched on the lamp. Its parchment shade, a spring scene etched and softly colored, was of Derry's making; and he wondered if he could bear to wait for her this afternoon, when, as usual at 5:30, she would come down the corridor from Jeff Marriot's class and *with* Jeff Marriot, to take him home. He filled his pipe and looked across the room through the obscuring smoke at his confrere's darkened desk. The papers carelessly strewn across it would be notes toward Marriot's monograph on Hulme, "T. E. Hulme and the Concept of Original Sin"—and Jeff could do that gaily and, one could never forget, competently—and if one had the suspicion that it might all have been done before . . . never, never with such a *tone*. He reached in his own desk for a manuscript.

Wren focused his eyes on the lamp shade, watching the smoke drawn up through it, drawn about the bulb in wraiths, and drifting languidly above. All sharpness had passed from the day, and now the drapes, which Dierdre had made to keep the draughts from the office, no longer backed a square of certain daylight. The faint luminosity from the window, the drifting smoke, the unfinished essay in his hands impressed the

weariness of day's end upon him. Then he heard the steps in the hall.

Marriot's—moving, as always, briskly and unevenly; the game leg providing the fascinating hesitation in stride. They had joked about it for years between themselves, he and Jeff: "Marriot's sprung rhythm" they had called it. The joke was the measure of their intimacy. He was almost ill with the gall of affection, as though he had tasted a cherished food on an upset stomach. Because, after all, if there was room for only one promotion, why shouldn't it have been Jeff: he could not hear Dierdre's steps.

He busied himself with his manuscript, shuffling papers with inordinate attention. He had always, except for Jeff, had more luck with his dead peers than his living ones. The steps came to an indecisive pause at the door, and Wren could see Marriot's bulky shadow on the frosted glass. An indefinite shadow of a hand came over the pane and touched the painted lettering; and then—and Dr. Wren shrunk into himself, pulling his elbows close to his sides and his shoulders down—lingered over his name, unchanged, below. It would not occur to Jeff Marriot that this could be seen, so innocent of guile was he.

Still the figure hesitated at the door, and, finally, desperately, Wren stood and walked over to the door and opened it—as casually as it was in him to do so.

"Oh," he said, "Jeff. I thought it was a student."

"Good afternoon, Paul." The eyes, always so candid and crinkled with incipient laughter, slid from his own and failed to find a satisfactory point of focus. "I was . . . I . . ."

"Come in, old man. Watch the paint." Wren reached for his shoul-

der, a gesture of many years. "It looks fine, doesn't it? Gives the place a tone."

"Oh? Yes . . ." Marriot came in under the tall man's arm, bundling papers; his head, disproportionately large and graying in wiry clusters of hair, bowed to his chest. "I left Dierdre talking to a student of yours. Turner."

"He was just here." Wren snapped on the wall light. "It still gets dark early."

Marriot dropped his papers on the desk with a characteristic, but somehow halfhearted, flourish and thrust himself into his chair. Dr. Wren settled his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and bent with elaborate attention over Turner's recommendation form.

"Paul . . .," Marriot shifted forward, the leg pushed awkwardly in front of him.

"Yes . . .?"

"I know we've talked this out . . ."

Wren closed his eyes; the decent voice went on, slurring the words in its distress, until Professor Wren felt he could not bear what he had done, what he had brought this good man to.

"I know . . .," Marriot was saying, "but . . . I can't have my name over yours that way—after the years we've worked together. If I thought it would do any earthly good, I'd tell the dean to skip the whole thing."

"It would do no good. Thank you, Jeff."

They looked fully at one another and then turned away, seeing the changes in them both that had been imperceptible in the familiarity of twenty years and now were blatant. Like a flowering out of season, Wren thought, that a frost would kill. But it

was the season; indeed, it was the season.

Marriot heaved himself from his seat. He shook his head. "Turner," he said. "I remember him. Had him two terms ago in *Criticism*. A nice boy—but inflexible. A serious weakness in him."

"Oh?" Wren's eyes looked inward toward other seasonal changes. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yes, he isn't sufficiently resilient, I thought. Not for this long haul." Marriot's awkwardness was pronounced. "Well, I'm on my way, Paul. Derry will be along; you must be proud of her," he said unnecessarily—it was a fact too obvious for discussion; his uneasiness lay in the reference to it at all. "She is amazingly sensitive."

"That was her mother's gift to her."

"I envy you." Marriot stepped to the door. "Please come up on Saturday. I'm having a little . . . a few people—our people—at 8:30. And please bring Dierdre . . ."

"Thank you. We will certainly be there."

iii

When she came, he had been listening so long to the stirrings that emphasize quiet in an old building, it was impressed upon him for the first time in his tenure at St. Andrews that Bentley was indeed the last building on the campus, and this very office was the extreme office. One did not pass it; it was at the end of the corridor—one came, or left, but one did not pass it by. Tomorrow the thought might be tolerable.

She did not knock today, as she usually did, but threw open the door and rushed up to him, not glancing to

where Jeff Marriot might be sitting. There was a protective defiance in the way she encircled his head with her arms and pressed her face against his hair; and defiance in her voice when she said: "O Daddy, I heard the nicest thing about you today. From Joe Turner—you know, that nice boy who's in your Am. Lit."

"Sit down, Derry," he said, "you have a remarkable capacity for attracting pleasant thoughts."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"No, it's only the truth." Wren lifted his briefcase to the desk and bent over it, filing the papers in compartments out of habit. "Do you know that young man very well?"

"Not really. I speak to him once in a while. But I saw him coming down the corridor, and this was the only place he could have been, and so . . ."

"Well, that's as good an excuse as any for striking up an acquaintance with a young fellow."

"Oh . . . !"

He snapped his briefcase closed and glanced at her affectionately. She was biting her lip, a short and humorous underlip, and certainly there was little concealed in that softly mobile face; she had not yet learned to guard her eyes, though the two years still ahead of her at St. Andrews might well take care of that. Two years. She held her notebook against her breast, tongue-tied with the naivete of her transparent plot. Wren adjusted his coat and held out a hand to her:

"Dr. Marriot is right. I'm a man to be envied."

"What do you mean, Daddy?"

He shook his head, and they walked down the corridor and out through the long white doors of Bentley. The lights of the campus were

coming on, and a faint spatter of rain brushed their faces. When she was a child, walking as quietly as she walked now, she would bring to them both—to her mother and himself—random gifts: odd stones, caterpillars, queer and unidentified weeds. She had always the capacity for sensing unease. It was sad to see her deprived of that direct and concrete mode of relief. Now, of course, she had only words, and she was singularly inadequate with them. And, of course, such devices as this one this afternoon. Had he really shown it all so obviously?

They had crossed Campus Line and were under the plane trees before their apartment building when she finally spoke. She could not permit herself to fail, he knew. In her own way, she, too, was inflexible.

"Joe Turner said that you never pretended. That you were the most honest teacher he knew. He said if he were a teacher, he would be like you."

"Thank you, Derry." Dr. Wren felt again the February dampness, and drew in his shoulders. They entered the apartment and pressed the button at the automatic elevator. He wondered how much of this was a fact and how much had been drawn from her fancy in pain. It seemed as unlike Turner as the communication of it was unlike his daughter. Like her mother, she was reticent in spoken approval: her praise was love, and she could not speak her love. He was suddenly ashamed.

The elevator rose, and on the fourth floor, in the apartment he had not moved from after his wife's death fifteen years before, he walked to the window while Dierdre clattered about the kitchen. Her footsteps behind him marked the dimensions of the place

where he was at home. Beneath him, the campus of St. Andrews spread to its boundaries along the River Road, in a perspective made strange by his mood. It was not extensive, really. Dierdre sang; a voice not devoid of melody, sweet with a feeling inappropriate to the words—yet something she never did. He pressed his forehead to the glass: how low the buildings were! Even the bell tower of St. Andrews reached scarcely above this level. There were no windows in the apartment that did not face on St. Andrews—but had it not been so for twenty years? It was difficult to believe that the perspective should seem strange to him.

"Daddy, I have a drink for you."

He sat with the cocktail at his desk; it was a luxury he allowed himself. Dierdre hummed behind him, setting the table. He spread out Turner's recommendation before him.

"Please, Derry," he excused himself, "don't sing. I have a headache."

Turner, a capable young man; inflexible, a real failing in him. Yes, one could not be inflexible; it might conceivably lead to a fourth floor apartment and the sadness of a child; it *might* lead to a young man's misplaced admiration on a late February afternoon.

He listened to her steps, and he sensed her presence as a spirit filling the apartment: a spirit waiting too, perhaps, to be freed—like Ariel. He wrote across the recommendation in his meticulous hand:

"Mr. Joseph Turner is in all respects an excellent young man. Yet I do not feel that, temperamentally, he is suited for consideration at this time for a departmental assistantship . . ."

It was the only kind thing to do.

Katherine Anne Porter's "Hacienda"

● George Hendrick

"Miss Porter succeeds beautifully in capturing the elusive properties of people and things," Howard Baker wrote in a review of "Hacienda," but he added what has become almost standard judgment of the work: "There is, however, an inconclusiveness in this story, a lack of a bold theme or of a sturdy fable."¹ Harry John Mooney, Jr., has complained that the narrator of the story has no "integral function," for she "makes no comment on it, and seems to serve mainly as reporter."² But a reading of "Hacienda" in the light of Miss Porter's essays and stories on Mexico, the filming of Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* and her 1940 preface to *Flowering Judas* will answer many of the objections to what seems to be Miss Porter's least popular short novel.

i

During the Madero revolution, Miss Porter wrote in 1923, an old lady remarked that the revolution was a great trouble, but worth it for the happiness of men, and not in heaven, but on earth. After that, Miss Porter felt that the seemingly unrelated events which grew out of the struggle were neither false, alien, nor aimless.³ Three years later, she retold in a long review the story of Rosalie Evans, a Texas-born widow of an Englishman, who recaptured her Mexican hacienda after it had been seized during the Madero revolution. Mrs. Evans had no understanding of the reasons of the Mexican Revolution and saw the history of the country in terms of the economic effect upon herself. After six years, she was ambushed; "as a human being she was avaricious," Miss Porter wrote, "with an extraordinary hardness of heart and ruthlessness of will; and she died in a grotesque cause."⁴

All during the 1920's and early 1930's, Miss Porter was passionately concerned with Mexican politics and art; for *The Days Before* she chose from among her uncollected essays "The Mexican Trinity," which illuminates her own intellectual engagement in the revolution. But even in 1921 she saw the resistance to change, the failure of the spirit of the revolution to touch the masses. She saw that "though the surface shifts and changes, one can readily deduce for oneself that one static combination remains, Land, Oil, and the Church."⁵ A static quality is implicit in "Hacienda," but Oil and the Church, were not her obvious concerns.

It is this feudal quality which contributes much to the irony of "Hacienda," for Uspensky, the communist director, has chosen the estate as the site for the filming of a movie, using as actors peons still serving the Spanish masters. In actuality, Uspensky bears a close resemblance to Sergei

Eisenstein, who along with his two assistants was given a leave from the Soviet Union in 1929. After a brief, unsatisfactory stay in Hollywood, they went to Mexico to make a film. Upton Sinclair and his wife raised \$25,000 for the making of *Que Viva Mexico!* According to Eisenstein's biographer, Marie Seton, much of the actual filming took place at Tetlapayac, a beautiful hacienda owned by Don Julio Saldivar. Eighty miles southeast of Mexico City, the fortress with "coral pink walls" had "two high towers like sentinels rising above a sea of symmetrical, immobile grey-green cactus — the maguey . . ." The estate, founded by one of Cortez's followers, had remained in the hands of the Saldivar family after the revolution, Miss Seton says, "because they agreed to turn it into an agricultural co-operative. Gradually . . . the peons . . . were slowly approaching what might some day become a better life."⁶ Miss Porter did not share this vague hope, apparently, for in her fictional account, an army is present to prevent change.

Eisenstein originally planned to do the movie in six parts, including introduction and conclusion. Only one section, part three (Novel II — "Maguey") was actually distributed commercially in the United States, and Eisenstein was not even allowed to supervise the final cutting and editing of that section. Worried by mounting costs and thousands of feet of film which obviously would not be used, Upton Sinclair sent his brother-in-law Hunter Kimbrough to oversee the production. Kimbrough was not, according to Miss Seton, experienced in film making, and he seems, because of his prudery, to have antagonized Eisenstein and his followers. Mr. Sinclair explained that his brother-in-law was "a young Southerner with very old-fashioned ideals of honor" who considered Eisenstein a great artist. Mr. Sinclair added, "I doubt if he ever heard of such a thing as a homo, and he was bewildered to find himself in such company. He discovered that E[isenstein] wanted money, money, money, and never had the slightest idea of keeping any promise he made. When K[imbrough], obeying my orders, tried to limit the money and the subjects shot, there were furious rows."⁷ The Kennerly of the novel corresponds in some respects with the picture drawn of Kimbrough in Miss Seton's book, even to having a brother-in-law who was an ardent prohibitionist, as Mr. Sinclair is.

Eisenstein's brief script for the Maguey section began with a paean to maguey, from which the Indians sucked the juice used in making pulque. "White, like milk," he characterized it — "a gift of the gods, according to legend and belief, this strongest intoxicant drowns sorrows, inflames passions . . ." He planned to film the ancient process of pulque making before turning to the Sebastian-Maria story: Sebastian, a peon, takes his bride, Maria, to the hacienda owner as "homage." The guards refuse to let Sebastian enter, and before the *haciendado*, who is entertaining friends, can give Maria a few coins, a carriage arrives with his daughter, and Maria is forgotten by all except the intoxicated villain, who ravishes her. One of Sebastian's friends sees what is happening and runs to tell Sebastian, who attempts to storm the gathering but is repulsed. The distraught Sebastian lusts for revenge, organizes the peons, and makes another attempt to free Maria, but the guards are too strong and the insurgents are forced to flee. They are pursued, and the *haciendado's* daughter, after killing one of the peons, is herself killed. Sebas-

tian is finally captured and summarily executed; the section ends with Maria finding his body among the magueys.⁸

Using as background the actual hacienda, a slightly fictionalized version of Eisenstein's artificial plot, and the rather bizarre personalities of those gathered at the hacienda for the filming, Miss Porter transmuted these materials into fiction, using as narrator the *I*, identified only as a woman writer strangely detached from the events. This disengagement is an expression of the disengagement and isolation of Laura in "Flowering Judas," for Laura, although drawn intellectually to the revolutionary movement, was unable to feel any form of love. After she delivers drugs which Eugenio uses to kill himself, she dreams of herself as a Judas, as a cannibal who had fed on others. Miss Porter has referred to the central idea of the story as "self-delusion," a theme also central to the later story "Old Mortality," in which Miranda rejects the past: "I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance."

Miranda has seen *some* of the truth but is self-deluded about her ability to know the truth about herself; Laura is frightened after her dream and is afraid to go back to sleep — the reader feels the horror as she becomes aware of her betrayal of herself, of Eugenio, of the aims of the revolution. In "Hacienda," published between these two stories, the narrator (rather like Hemingway's Frederick Henry, distrusting all the old shibboleths) seemingly does not attempt to get beneath the surface of the action, protecting herself by recording, not probing. Miss Porter's change of attitude in presenting her materials is particularly dramatic, for in her first major published story, "Maria Concepcion" (1922), she presents the story as seen from inside the Mexican culture. In "Flowering Judas" she presents a character partially alienated from the culture, and in "Hacienda" (1932) the narrator is almost completely disengaged. Finally, in the Miranda stories of the 1930's she is again re-engaged, again emotionally involved with the characters, again probing the past and seeking the motivation of action.

ii

"Hacienda" is much more than a comedy of manners, although the narrator does delineate the foibles of the Americans, Mexicans, and Russians at the hacienda. The narrator begins with a brilliant scene portraying Kennerly, the business manager of the movie, and contrasts him with the docile Mexicans whom he regards as inferior, filthy, disease-ridden nuisances. Always in the background is the "true revolution of blessed memory" which had abolished third-class train travel, just as it had changed the names of many things "nearly always with the view to an appearance of heightened well-being for all creatures." In spite of Kennerly's outrageous Anglo-Saxon superiority, he tellingly describes the graft and corruption of the government but is outraged only when affected by it.

Andreyev, assistant to the famous director Uspensky, explained to the narrator, after Kennerly, lulled by warm beer and germ-free American foods, fell asleep, that the Russians had chosen the hacienda as a setting because

the pulque-making process had not changed since the very beginning, and the hacienda itself had not changed. His views were borne out by the still shots of the movie: the unchanged land filled with figures "under a doom imposed by the landscape," the peons filled with "instinctive suffering" but "without individual memory." The camera had caught the "ecstatic death-expectancy which is in the air of Mexico." He also recounted the tangled affair after Lolita, the one professional actress in the movie, joined the film company, first becoming mistress to Don Gerano, then inseparable friend of Dona Julia, Don Gerano's wife. The Dona Julia-Lolita relationship seems perverse and decadent, even in the jocularly-narrated version of Andreyev.

But much of the story revolves around the various reactions to the tragedy on the hacienda that day: Justino's (the Just) shooting his sister. The Indian boy who plays one of the leads in the movie reports that Justino shot her accidentally and that after running away had been captured and returned by his friend Vicente (the Victor). One of the peons reported that this was the second time in Justino's family that a brother had killed a child. The song writer Montana insisted the boy incestuously loved his sister:

Ah, poor little Rosalita
Took herself a new lover,
Thus betraying the heart's core
Of her impassioned brother . . .

Now she lies dead, poor Rosalita,
With two bullets in her heart . . .
Take warning, my young sisters,
Who would from your brothers part.

But he is perhaps more interested in his *corrido* than in the truth, and his theory appears no more valid than the others. Kennerly is not concerned with motives but is fearful of a damage suit brought by the parents. Later Kennerly sees the bitter irony of Justino's playing the part in the movie of a boy who kills a girl (played by his sister) by accident, attempts to escape, and is captured by the character played by Vicente. He complains the dead girl should have been photographed, to add more realism to the scene in the movie. When Justino returns, he must play the scene again, for the light had not been right, play again the scene already played twice. But Kennerly's emotions are, as usual, wrong, and he thinks of Justino's acute discomfort with glee.

The narrator is conscious of the spirit of the grandfather, who did not understand or approve of his grandson and wife and had retired to a remote section of the hacienda "where he lived in bleak dignity and loneliness, without hope and without philosophy, perhaps contemptuous of both . . ." His grandson lived with even less purpose; women, fast cars, airplanes, speed were his desires. His wife led the life of a pampered aristocrat, dressed in outlandish costumes, as if she were an actress in a Hollywood comedy, carrying about a foolish lap dog. The two are Mexican copies of the lost generation. Their alienation is also shared by Betancourt, the movie censor, "com-

pletely at the mercy of an ideal of elegance and detachment perpetually at war with a kind of Mexican nationalism . . ." and by the Mexican overseer, who was miserable because his new trousers were too tight; Andreyev said of him: "All he can do with his life is to put on a different pair of fancy trousers every day and sit on that bench hoping that something, anything, may happen."

The great Uspensky is enigmatic, dressed in a monkey suit, with a monkey face, and with "a monkey attitude towards life." He is unconcerned about the fate of Justino; Don Gerano is concerned because the judge wants a bribe to release the boy. He will not pay, because to do so would mean continual blackmail by judges. The emotions of Justino and Vicente are hidden from the narrator, but these emotions seem more intense when contrasted with the insensitivity of those who at first talk endlessly of the affair but then put it out of their minds as "far away and not worth thinking about."

The fate of the victimized peon rests with Velarde, "the most powerful and successful revolutionist in Mexico. He owned two pulque haciendas which had fallen to his share when the great repartition of land had taken place." Don Gerano was appealing to him, but Velarde would also demand a bribe.

A heavy, rotting smell lying over the hacienda from the pulqueria is symbolic of the spiritual and moral corruption within the compound and of the corruption in the society itself. And all over Mexico the Indians partook of the products of the hacienda; they would "swallow forgetfulness and ease by the riverful, and the money would flow silver-white into the government treasury; Don Gerano and his fellow *haciendados* would fret and curse, the Agrarians would raid, and ambitious politicians in the capital would be stealing right and left enough to buy such haciendas for themselves. It was all arranged." The theme of inevitability seems an echo of the passage from Ecclesiastes used by Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*.

When the guests visit the pulqueria, which is enveloped in religious myths of its own, they see the figure of Maria Santisima standing in a niche, with a perpetual light at her feet. The walls of the room are covered with a fresco telling the story of this Indian girl who discovered the divine liquor and became a half goddess. Later that day the visitors do not enter the hacienda chapel; they pose for pictures in front of the closed doors, and Montana, the failure, plays a fat priest. The scene points out again the alienation of all those gathered at the hacienda.

iii

Miss Porter skillfully interweaves the elements of the story: the satiric character sketches, the Mexican social and political scene, the tragic life of the peons, the theme of appearance-reality specially heightened by the film-making motif, but "Hacienda" should also be seen in the light of the "Introduction" (1940) to *Flowering Judas*, a collection of stories which ended with "Hacienda." Miss Porter insists that the stories were fragments of a larger plan: "they are what I was then able to achieve in the way of order and form and statement in a period of grotesque dislocations in a whole society when the

world was heaving in the sickness of a millennial change." The disengagement of the narrator is broken in an incident with dogs. The dogs at the hacienda kept chasing the soldiers to their accustomed place; the dogs also chased the pigs, but the pigs knew they were not in danger and the chase was actually a game. But the narrator saw just before arriving at the hacienda hungry dogs chasing a rabbit; she cried out, "Run, rabbit, run!" but the Indian driver (unaware that he was symbolically a rabbit not a dog) shouted encouragement to the dogs and offered to place a wager on the outcome. The fate of the rabbit is not given, just as Justino's fate is not known, but it is likely he will not return; his fate is particularly meaningful in light of Miss Porter's concern for "the terrible failure of the life of man in the Western world."

"Hacienda" is not slight, not the mere notes for a novel; it is rather a brilliantly executed story of disengagement, of spiritual, physical, moral, and psychological isolation, a short novel of the lost generation. Unlike Jake Barnes and Lady Brett, who can talk about their reasons for being without hope and without faith, the narrator protects herself from the past, does not reveal the reasons for her being an observer instead of an actor, thereby increasing the totality of her isolation.

¹Howard Baker, "Some Notes on New Fiction," quoted in Edward Schwartz, "Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Bibliography," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 57 (May 1953), 241.

²*The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter* (Pittsburgh 1957), p. 39.

³"Why I Write About Mexico," in *The Days Before* (New York 1952), p. 240.

⁴"La Conquistadora," in *The Days Before*, p. 261.

⁵*The Days Before*, p. 254.

⁶Marie Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein* (London 1952), pp. 195-196. The film was released under the title *Thunder over Mexico*.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 515-516.

⁸S. M. Eisenstein, *Que Viva Mexico!* (London 1951), pp. 47-62.



Illusion and Allusion: Reflections in "The Cracked Looking-Glass"

● Brother Joseph Wiesenfarth, F.S.C.

Henry James's *nouvelle* "The Beast in the Jungle" is the story of an opportunity missed; it is the story of the fate of John Marcher, who spends his life waiting for something to happen to him and who, when it does happen, fails to notice it. James's "In the Cage" presents the little drama of a very imaginative and vibrant young woman's easing the ache of the actual in a Cinderella world, but ultimately finding that world so dangerous that she scurries back to reality before the coach becomes a pumpkin. In Katherine Anne Porter's "The Cracked Looking-Glass," which parallels elements of both of James's tales, Rosaleen O'Toole passes from the world of the man's waiting to that of the girl's scurrying as she rescues herself from the dream and accepts reality. It is the story of a dreamer whose every day is spent in anticipation of "something great . . . going to happen," but who must finally admit that each of her days has been a "straying from one terrible disappointment to another." It projects the complex action of a woman's making her life meaningful almost at the moment she realizes how much of it has been otherwise, and in so doing "The Cracked Looking-Glass" dramatizes the accommodation of her illusions to reality.¹

Rosaleen and Dennis O'Toole are two very different persons. Dennis, about seventy-five, is no longer robust: "He clacked his teeth together and felt how they didn't fit anymore, and his feet and hands seemed tied on him with strings." To him the past is something upon which the present is built, and as the foundation of the present, it is static and dead. "His past lay like a great lump within him; there it was, he knew it all at once . . ." Life for Dennis is a peaceful existence in the present: the quiet life of a soft chair, a warm kitchen fire, a comfortable pipe, and a young and handsome wife. Rosaleen carries her forty-five years very well; after twenty-five years of marriage she "didn't look to be a year older." To Rosaleen the past is exciting and alive; it holds for her more of what life seems to be meant for than does the present. It is the storehouse of stories, dreams, and sundry unrealities. The past contrasts violently with the present, which is a round of farm chores, unpleasant neighbors, and caring for Dennis: "She said to the cow: 'It's no life, no life at all. A man of his years is no comfort to a woman' . . ." The contrast of their lives in these and other ways creates a problem for Rosaleen: "It wasn't being a wife at all to wrap a man in flannels like a baby and put hot water bottles on him." At the heart of Rosaleen's discontent lies the problem of the meaning of her marriage to Dennis. "The Cracked Looking-Glass" is a dramatization of her groping toward a realization of that meaning.

The answer to the question of the meaning of Rosaleen's marriage may

be thought of as evolving in three movements, which — while ultimately interdependent — can be quite accurately described as involving faith in the past, hope in the future, and love in the present.

The object of faith in the past is the dream — a form of illusion readily available to Rosaleen, who unconsciously uses it to mollify the impact of reality upon herself. At one time, "The world is a wilderness"; at another, "Life is a dream." Rosaleen's mechanism for dealing with reality as wilderness is to metamorphose it into "reality" as dream. As "The Cracked Looking-Glass" begins, Rosaleen is doing precisely this for Mr. Pendleton, to whom she is relating the story of the Billy-cat:

"It was the strangest thing happened to the Billy-cat, Mr. Pendleton. He sometimes didn't come in for his supper till after dark, he was so taken up with the hunting, and then one night he didn't come at all, nor the next day neither, nor the next, and me with him on my mind so I didn't get a wink of sleep. Then at midnight on the third night I did go to sleep, and the Billy-cat came into my room and lep upon my pillow and said: 'Up beyond the north field there's a maple tree with a great scar where the branch was taken away by the storm, and near to it is a flat stone, and there you'll find me. I was caught in a trap,' he says; 'wasn't set for me,' he says, 'but it got me all the same. And now be easy in your mind about me,' he says, 'for it's all over.' Then he went away, giving me a look over his shoulder like a human creature, and I woke up Dennis and told him. Surely as we live, Mr. Pendleton, it was all true. So Dennis went beyond the north field and brought him home and we buried him in the garden and cried over him."

Dennis however, is not partial to this imaginative construct:

"Always something, now," he commanded, putting his head in at the kitchen door. "Always telling a tall tale."

"Well," said Rosaleen, without the least shame, "he wanted a story so I gave him a good one. That's the Irish in me."

Dennis, in striking contrast with his wife, has an alternate interpretation of what it means to be Irish:

To be Irish, he felt, was to be like him, a sober, practical, thinking man, a lover of truth. Rosaleen couldn't see it at all. "It's just your head is like a stone!" she said to him once, pretending she was joking, but she meant it.

The action of the story subsequent to this event develops through an interplay between reality and the illusion until the point is reached when Rosaleen is able to accommodate herself to the truth that Dennis invariably sees so clearly.

The neat and orderly solution to the death of the Billy-cat that Rosaleen uses to assuage Mr. Pendleton's curiosity — and quite probably her loss of the cat as well — is similar to the dreams she has dreamed and will

dream to accommodate herself to reality. The story of great-grandfather is typical.

Rosaleen and her sister Honora, when they were girls, were ordered to keep a watch over their dying great-grandfather. Their giddiness, however, so provoked the old man that "great-grandfather opened the one eye full of rage and says, ' . . . To hell with ye.' " The disturbing effects of this incident were made benign for Rosaleen through the mediation of a dream in which the old man ordered his great-granddaughter to have a Mass said for his soul, now in Purgatory. The reality was accommodated to the dream and Rosaleen was able to live with it.

This pattern repeats itself again and again: first the painful reality presents itself, and then the dream that assuages the pain occurs. During her youth in Ireland Rosaleen missed marrying a young Irish boy. The chance missed has a particular poignancy at this trying time in Rosaleen's married life, but a dream has intervened and softened the impact of reality:

Rosaleen nodded her head. "Ah, Dennis, if I'd set my heart on that boy I need never have left Ireland. And when I think how it all came out with him. With me so far away, him struck on the head and left for dead in a ditch."

"You dreamed that," said Dennis.

"Surely I dreamed it, and it is so. When I was crying and crying over him —" Rosaleen was proud of her crying — "I didn't know then what good luck I would find here."

Again, when the young Irishman Kevin left the O'Tooles after having lived with them for a year, he wrote to them only once. His obvious ingratitude is argued away by Rosaleen's dream. She dreams that Kevin is dead. He did not write because "he hadn't the power any more."

The central adventure in this phase of Rosaleen's life of illusion is her dream that Honora lies dying in Boston. The dream comes in the dead of winter and at a time when things seem so bad that they cannot get worse. Dennis has even come to think that "there would come a day when she would say outright, 'It's no life here, I won't stay here any longer' . . ." Reality has become bitter; Rosaleen's dream comes to sweeten it. Obviously, she must go to Boston to see Honora. The trip is made by way of New York, where a few hours are allocated for two romantic movies: "The Prince of Love" and "The Lover King." Then Rosaleen proceeds to Boston, only to find that Boston is the point of no return. Rosaleen has literally allowed her imagination to take her too far this time: in leaving her Connecticut home she has left the place where the dream can safely be believed in. Her attempt to live the dream in Boston is an utter failure. Honora is not only not sick, but she has moved from her old address without ever having notified Rosaleen. Faith in the dream is no longer possible (as Rosaleen later tells Dennis: "I don't put the respect on dreams I once did"). But reality is still too difficult for Rosaleen to accept; her substitute for both it and the belief she has lost becomes an unfounded hope in the future.

Here with the Honora episode the patterning of meaning can be seen

in a transitional phase. With the Billy-cat, great-grandfather, the young Irish boy, and Kevin, the reality appeared first and then the dream which made that irksome reality acceptable. The Honora sequence initiates a change in this pattern as it moves from reality (the difficult life in Connecticut) to dream (the dying Honora) to reality (Honora's having moved). Subsequent to this episode the movement *reality-illusion* (as dream) gives place to the movement *illusion-reality*. Since the illusions that Rosaleen nurtures for a comfortable future are intended to transform from uncongeniality certain aspects of that future, the illusions that will effect the transformation appear initially; and then reality makes its incursion to destroy those illusions. Just as the story changes at this point — when *reality-illusion* is replaced by *illusion-reality* — it will change again when this new system disintegrates and *reality* alone remains. At that point the story will end. In outline, then, the entire configuration of central meanings may be shown as follows:

reality-illusion

Billy-cat episode
Great-grandfather episode
Irish boy episode
Kevin episode

reality-illusion-reality

Honora episode

illusion-reality

Hugh Sullivan episode
Neighbor episode
Kevin episode
Guy Richards episode

reality

Rosaleen-Dennis tableau
at the end of the story

The *illusion-reality* segment of this development is shaped by Rosaleen's making the object of hope in the future one or another illusion on which will depend the possibility of a comfortable life with Dennis in Connecticut. She seeks first to create a substitute for Kevin when she happens upon Hugh Sullivan, the down-and-out Irish immigrant whom she meets in Boston. She befriends the young man, feeds him, and offers him a job on the Connecticut farm. Hugh, however, takes her generosity to be a solicitation of another kind: "It's not safe at all," said Hugh, "I was caught at it once in Dublin, and there was a holy row!" With this misinterpretation, hope for the future as it relates to Sullivan is destroyed for Rosaleen: "The *cheek* of ye," said she, "insulting a woman could be your mother."

Rosaleen loses the support of another illusion almost immediately after her return to Connecticut. She finds that her neighbor thinks of her in the same way that Hugh Sullivan did: "So that's the way it is here, is it? That's what my life has come to, I'm a woman of bad fame with the neighbors."

Rosaleen, urgently in need of comfort, thinks again about Kevin; if the dream about Honora was wrong, the dream about Kevin becomes, by analogy,

just as incorrect: "All day long I've been thinking Kevin isn't dead at all, and we shall see him in this very house before long." Dennis, however, remains an adamant realist: "That's no sign at all," he said. Rosaleen thinks no more about Kevin. Guy Richards becomes the next object of her hope.

The Guy Richards case has an element of complexity about it.² Throughout most of the story Rosaleen denies his attractive features. He has loomed as a danger to her: "If ever he lays a finger on me; I'll shoot him dead." But Rosaleen is obviously on the defensive here because Guy — with his "voice like the power of scrap-iron falling" — is all that Dennis is not. Toward the end of the story she admits the part that Richards plays in making reality a little more durable. She waits for him to stop in and exchange a word of greeting:

Rosaleen didn't know what to expect, then, and then: surely he couldn't be stopping? Ah, surely he *couldn't* be going on? She sat down again with her heart just nowhere, and took up the tablecloth, but for a long time she couldn't see the stitches. She was wondering what had become of her life; every day she had thought something great was going to happen, and it was all just straying from one terrible disappointment to another.

As Guy Richards goes rattling down the road, Rosaleen's hope is shattered. Just as the ordering mechanism of the past collapsed when her dream was confronted with the reality of Honora's absence, the promise of the future — already minimized by Hugh Sullivan's cynicism and her neighbor's uncharity — is destroyed by Richards' failure to stop. The failure of the visions of faith and hope to substantiate themselves has made meaningless that past and that future which were structured on them. Only love and the present remain for Rosaleen, and these she accepts as she makes her whole-hearted return to reality:

Ah, what was there to remember, or to look forward to now? Without thinking at all, she leaned over and put her head on Dennis's knee. "Whyever," she asked him, in an ordinary voice, "did ye marry a woman like me?"

"Mind you don't tip over in that chair now," said Dennis. "I knew well I could never do better." His bosom began to thaw and simmer. It was going to be all right with everything, he could see that.

She sat up and felt his sleeves carefully. "I want you to wrap up warm this bitter weather, Dennis," she told him. "With two pairs of socks and the chest protector, for if anything happened to you, whatever would become of me in this world?"

"Let's not think of it," said Dennis, shuffling his feet.

"Let's not, then," said Rosaleen. "For I could cry if you crooked a finger at me."

Here at the story's end Rosaleen breaks the pattern of her life. She frees reality from the dreams and illusions that she used formerly to disguise it.

Thus, paradoxically enough, order is reestablished by attention to a reality which until this time has constituted disorder. The appearance of order in the dream and the illusion, in the objects of faith and hope, gives place to the truth of Dennis's old age and the reality of love in the present.

Besides this linear, diachronic movement — structured in a pattern which repeats basic meanings associated with the softening of reality by some form of an illusion until the point is reached where the illusion can no longer withstand the demands of reality — the story has another kind of movement in relation to its central symbol. That movement might best be called centripetal and centrifugal — rather than linear — since it has a center in the cracked looking-glass, toward which meanings continually move and from which they are tangentially released. These meanings, too, it would seem, are very complex and give to the linear movement new dimensions to the degree that the complexity of the cracked looking-glass as a central symbol is understood.

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that the plot structure of "The Cracked Looking-Glass," parallels in part that of two of Henry James's *nouvelles*: "The Beast in the Jungle" and "In the Cage," and I briefly demonstrated some similarities between it and these tales. In relation to them "The Cracked Looking-Glass" takes on a more profound significance — in the same manner that any story does when its relation to a basic myth or archetype is understood. The fact, for instance, that Rosaleen is in danger of suffering the same fate as Marcher makes her predicament more meaningful to the reader who knows something about Marcher. The facts, too, that Dennis has a pipe that is carved with a "crested lion glaring out of jungle," and that he sets aside this pipe when Rosaleen is on the verge of rejecting her last chance to return to reality, suggest Katherine Anne Porter's interest in extending the boundaries of meaning in her story to those of James's. Miss Porter employs a similar technique to create connotations for her central symbol.

The cracked looking-glass provides some immediately available meanings. Obviously, as its description shows, Rosaleen does not see clearly when she looks into it. Also Rosaleen consults the glass on special occasions only; when Kevin *leaves*, when she *leaves* Guy Richards, when Guy *leaves*, and when she *leaves* to visit Honora. It has nothing to do with *staying* with Dennis. This is so, probably, because the glass is certainly a symbol of their marriage, which does not reflect the romantic love of the New York movies that Rosaleen relishes. And, of course, there is a thirty-year gap in their ages. But in the light of other literary works in which this symbol appears, Katherine Anne Porter's mirror symbol takes on other meanings as well.

In the Telemachus section of Joyce's *Ulysses*,³ "Stephen bent forward and peered at the mirror held out to him, cleft by a crooked crack, hair on end." It is a mirror that Buck Mulligan stole from the room of an Irish maid-servant.

Drawing back and pointing, Stephen said with bitterness:

—It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.

The relevance of this excerpt to the story is immediately obvious. Rosaleen was formerly a "chambermaid in a rich woman's home." The glass is hers. If for Stephen the cracked mirror is a symbol of Irish art, for the reader — as he refers it to Rosaleen — it is the symbol of her imagination. Her view of the world, like that of Irish artists' for Daedalus, is distorted. Through Joyce, then, this new dimension is added to the symbol's complex of meanings, and by reference to Joyce the defective mirror symbolizes Rosaleen's involvement with an unreal world.

The cracked looking-glass also suggests a relation to Tennyson that explores a dimension of the symbol's meaning different from the one suggested by Joyce. The Lady of Shalott spends her days weaving a "magic web with colours gay," while observing through a mirror the reality of life outside her tower. She looks out directly on life, though, when attracted by the figure of Sir Lancelot, whom she follows to Camelot and her death. She leaves behind her, as a symbol of the end of her isolation from reality, "the mirror crack'd from side to side." The incidental and otherwise irrelevant note that Rosaleen has been sewing a never-to-be-finished tablecloth for fifteen years suggests a connection with the Lady of Shalott. Less tenuous is the fact that to both women reality is mediated: to one through a mirror and to the other through illusions. Rosaleen goes to Boston, just as the Lady went to Camelot, and her confrontation with reality deals a death blow to the dream and spells the beginning of the end for her illusions. The symbol of reality for both, then, is the cracked looking-glass; and as a symbol of reality the mirror is, as Dennis twice tells Rosaleen, "a good enough glass."

The last extension of meaning for this symbol that I should like to suggest is *in a way* Pauline: "We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner, but then face to face." The inadequate looking-glasses of the ancients, which Paul refers to here, were as unsatisfactory as Rosaleen's cracked mirror when like that mirror they literally attempted to reflect reality. The crack in Rosaleen's glass and the inadequacy of the one referred to in I Corinthians 13: 12 require an eventual face-to-face confrontation. For Paul that confrontation takes place when charity is perfected in heaven; for Rosaleen and Dennis it occurs when she abjures her faith in the dream and her hope in the illusion and recognizes that for her the only reality is love in the present. Husband and wife then meet face to face in the final tableau without even the suggestion of the defective glass (which Joyce had referred to as "crooked"): "I could cry if ye crooked your finger at me." If for St. Paul in one sense faith and hope pass away, so for Rosaleen faith in the dream and hope in the illusion represent, in a non-theological way, ultimately unsatisfactory answers for human fulfillment; and for both — again in their own sense of the word — *love* abides in its sustaining greatness.

The function and meaning of the mirror symbol in "The Cracked Looking-Glass," then, as I have attempted to demonstrate, are very complex. The symbol derives its dimensions from the meanings that accrete to it in the course of the action of the story and those that it has in relation to the sources from which I have suggested it may spring. It stands at the center of the story in a chameleon-like fashion, meaning one thing

now and one thing later while still being the same thing and having all the possibilities of its meaning simultaneously. In the cracked looking-glass the imagination of Rosaleen, the imperfection of human love, the necessity of accepting that love as it is, the marriage of Rosaleen and Dennis, reality, the difficulty of knowing reality, and many other meanings that the story incorporates are symbolized. Thus, along with the linear organization of the meanings patterned by the interplay of reality with the dream and the illusion, the centrifugal and centripetal action of this symbol testifies to the craftsmanship of Katherine Anne Porter as it shapes the esthetically satisfying form assumed by those illusions and allusions that are so carefully reflected in "The Cracked Looking-Glass."

¹Critics have given very little attention to "The Cracked Looking-Glass"; in fact no extensive commentary exists. For brief notes see Harry John Mooney, *The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter* (Pittsburgh 1957), pp. 44-46; Robert Penn Warren, "Irony with a Center: Katherine Anne Porter," *Kenyon Review*, IV (Winter 1942), 41f.; Charles A. Allen, "Katherine Anne Porter: Psychology as Art," *Southwest Review*, XLI (Summer 1956), 224f.

²It is noteworthy that Richards at one point in the story begins to recite Fitz-Greene Halleck's "Marco Bozzaris," a ballad in which a Turkish chieftain awakens from a dream of conquest to find that Bozzaris and his Grecian followers have surrounded and all but defeated his army. Through this brief allusion, Richards is associated with the dream world which Rosaleen has already renounced and with her expectations for the future, which subsequently prove to be as unfounded as those of the Turkish leader.

³I am indebted to Professor James Hafley of The Catholic University of America for directing me to *Ulysses* for an instance of the mirror symbol and for further suggesting an investigation of symbol's possible relation to Tennyson's "Lady of Shalott."



Two Poems

● Charles B. Tinkham

Walls for the New Student

Cities grow.
A house is shattered
Into an avalanche of musty timber
To make room for other walls,
Other wood for steady time's decay.
Yesterday the slant
Of sun through an old willow
Stubbornly persistent
Beside the clean glass tiers
Of a million-dollar-new apartment
Brought strangely to our minds
The only memory left in this town
Of a boy gone long since,
Into whatever town, whatever life.
He used to play
In moody defiance of us
In the spring and autumn shadows
Of that tree, then beside
A ramshackle, gabled ghost of a house.
That first day in school
He twisted pale-faced before the teacher,
Hands in pockets,
Clothes bagging out around him
As if he'd stepped into them all at once.
'But do you mean to say,' Miss Kripps said,
(Young, jeweled, popular with parents)
'You don't know what your own father does?
How silly!'
A silence grew among us,
Infected us with ridicule and dread,
And at last the boy slithered down into his desk.
We avoided him henceforth
With all the cruel candor of youth,
A boy who, we told our mothers,
Didn't know what his own father did.
The mothers looked at us strangely
And gazed fixedly at the walls
As if to keep them from disappearing.

Horizon

● Charles B. Tinkham

Farmers in a bar
With beers in front of them
Less than the yellow of mustard seed:
'How many did you lose
In the last litter?'
'Four dead of distemper'
(With hat cocked over eyes
As bloodshot as sunset).
And they wonder why the rain
Just tantalizes the soil
With shallow-rooted weeds,
Till the throat cracks dryly
On a word of hope;
Why chicks die
As quick as frost snaps;
Why the field heavy with clover for two years
Grows only the limp-stalked corn
This year.
They wonder and drink.
And stare with far eyes
As at rain they feel
But cannot see
Licking the dry horizon.

Waldie

● Alma Roberts Giordan

If Waldie Begnal had not been drawn into a fast crowd, he'd never have known the difference. But he was, and did, and that made all the difference. The scar went inward that shrank and shriveled his heart.

Waldie was obese and thirty-five when he met Grazia Platt, obese and ten years younger. She was part of the active company clique that gladly included one more bachelor on their carrousel of partying, picnicking, and general what-the-hell-all. Their mutual attraction was, blithe friends presumed, in kindred bulk. He was expected to gravitate toward her—the course of least resistance opened invitingly. Grazia, with good nature supposedly built into fat people, acquiesced smilingly. Rather she laughed, for she was the loud, laughing type, with ebullience bubbling buoyantly as a robin's June morning praise.

She made no apologies about her overweight—solid fat it was in comparison to Waldie's six feet, two-forty avoirdupois. It took a dinosaur's age to develop such tough hide, she confided to him; in the accomplishing of that feat she had gained peace of mind. So she could readily joke about it. Waldie couldn't, sincerely—always he was conscious of the gross flesh puffing his cheeks, swelling his abdomen, making tree trunks of his thighs. Fate had given him a remarkably good-looking face, then in spite covered it with baby fat. His summer-ocean eyes slapped whitecap resentment against the mirror as flabby

fingers combed through cherubic curls. He was always a loner, and the playful crowd fascinated him. He never suspected companionship could be so rewarding. All those Saturday nights wasted, he reflected, sitting before the radio or television beside Molly, his mother, reading classics to her while she knitted scarves for him against the cold. She was convinced that her lone chick was a frail man—as he had been susceptible to sickness throughout childhood. Of this she frequently reminded him, insisting that he wear an extra sweater and wool socks, and carry the umbrella against rain to be ducked through from parking lot to office.

"Ah," she prefaced, "it's lucky you be, my bucko, having me to look after you. I doubt you'd come out of the weather without telling." Then she kissed him, lest he take her solicitude for nagging. The last person on earth to criticize would be Waldie. For he was a dear boy, as she repeatedly acknowledged to Rose Dunn, a loyal son, a comfort to her decrepit widowhood.

Molly had the contours of a beauty, and Waldie, eying her bland mask from behind his newspaper, still saw her so. His sigh from the depth of the master chair—it had been his father's—bore only a tinge of apprehension, for the day must come when she would leave him. And what will poor robin do then? he thought, already chilled. Forty, perhaps, and all alone, with who to look after him?

He went to her suddenly, taking the wrinkled hand against his cheek for solace. She smiled, did Molly, reading her son's fancy, loving him fiercely and aware of the importance of their every minute together.

"Ah, poor laddie," she murmured, "it's blest I am to be the object of your love. Could a body ever doubt my fortune? To have so devoted a son in my useless widowhood?"

He dropped her hand and returned to his paper, most of the uneasiness erased, both undoubtedly richer for such communication. But I am entitled to a bit of gaiety—she'll never be the wiser, he thought to himself when she went to get his hot cocoa. She's the one always saying what you don't know won't hurt you. It's only a temporary fling—I'll be the more relaxed for it the evenings I stay home.

He recalled his father, whom he had loved immensely—a mysterious suicide. Waldie had been the man of the house since he was ten years old. He forgave his handsome sire, but still could not unsnarl the tangle of why he had put the gun to his head. It was not solely the drink. He took the hot cocoa with melted marshmallow afloat, stirring away his mother's reflection in it as an amorphous, unpleasant conjecture.

In the house Waldie supported, his father was still a power. He shied from the term *ghostly weapon*, wielded by a serene, selfless mother whose every breath was drawn for his welfare. "Poor lad," she perceived, touching his blond, thinning curls. "Had your pap the courage to live, you'd have your own angels about yourself this night." The rocker creaked gently as she built up her theme. "God forgive his crazed passion—which we'll not fathom till

we journey beyond—that leaves you to sustain and aid me past years I never hoped to bide with such shame and grief. Forgive him, Waldie, as I do. Let no resentment cloud that fore'ead more precious than the blood pumping through this old heart in my breast. Ah, the buckets of tears I've shed over our joint lot—though you've nobly accepted your responsibility, son, never for a moment doubt that."

Grazia, his thought strained, will you bring a lemon meringue pie to the picnic tomorrow? If you have the courage to get into a bathing suit, I'll go in the water with you. I can swim; there's no weight, no awkwardness to me in the water. And while Molly went on to anticlimax, mumbling over her knitting, he mused about the dark-skinned, live-eyed young woman who had brightened recent gatherings, related him to the merry crowd, allowed him no burden beyond pleasure. He half-convinced himself there was an affinity between them, feeling again her arm, suntanned against his, rubbing close. A not unpleasant chafe, for being sensitive-blond he burnt readily. He dropped the paper, snapping off his reverie, said goodnight to Molly, and went to bed. Tomorrow he'd be with Grazia again, on a holiday to anticipate.

* * *

He had had a grand time at the picnic. Driving home from 10 o'clock Mass, he had to tell Molly. She'd begun talking about the oversize roast which wouldn't be ready by twelve, his punctual dinner hour, promising: "I'll broil the steak for you instead."

"But I thought you were going to Nell's," he said.

She cocked a sharp sidewise eye. "Didn't I inform you? Ah, my mind

must be slipping, too. Nell's away this week-end. Sure, it hurts to be dropped by a daughter like that, but I'm used to disappointments. Anyway, home with you's more restful. Nell's never been close since that sorry marriage. D'you know, he still calls her up when he feels inclined?"

"Inclined? It's his right," Waldie said sullenly. "He's the kid's father, isn't he? And she won't give him the divorce."

His mother paled. "Divorce! What disgrace would you urge on my old head now? Whilst I'm living, there'll be no divorce of my flesh and blood. Let her lie in her bed—the thorns are her own plaiting. I warned her against him. Lordy knows, I've seen sufficient likes."

He probed carefully for the right words. His mother's sharp tongue evoked ugly memories. He remembered his father under the influence of alcohol. He considered his sister's mistake, her foolish determination, her stubborn rejection of freedom. What hell for Nell, he punned sourly, clinging to a tie that strangled three persons, herself, the boy so bewildered, Tom, who knew what he was and why. Was divorce more sinful than such slow-murder sucking at the stem of this damned poison cloverleaf? Molly definitely thought so, digging in her root.

"I'd a plan of my own for the day," he stated casually. "When you said you'd be off, I took a picnic invitation to Munger Lake."

Her head jerked like a mother hen's. Eye intent on her chick, she clucked: "Oh? And who with, might I inquire?"

"Armand," he said laconically, "from the drafting room."

She composed her face. "Ah, yes, I met him. A bluff, ain't he?"

"A great bluff," he agreed, "all yip and no nip." He grinned.

"It's the traditional poet you are," she granted. "I know you're too big to be influenced by him, Waldie." She touched his knee. "A good, clean son you are, and I shouldn't have any fear."

"Ah, he's wild, Mother, but clean as a whistle and harmless." His voice rose louder than he meant, exaggerating Armand's virtues. He looked away. "You've no cause to fret—I'll vouch for my friends. But I did pledge myself."

Her girl-laugh trilled. "Sure you'll go. Take along the steak."

"I'll buy one. You keep the steak for yourself."

"With these loose plates?" she chided gently. "You earned it, you take it. I'll have a cup of soup and a long nap. You'll be home by dark, won't you?"

"I can't say. It's an hour each way. Armand's driving."

"You won't have the decision, then." She got out of the car. "Would you want to bring them all in when they call for you, laddie? I'll make a pitcher of lemonade."

"No," he said quickly, "they won't be thirsty so early."

Her look was direct. "Ah, well. I'm relieved to trust you, Waldie."

* * *

He sat with Grazia on the beach. Long, piano-playing fingers dangled from her chubby arms. She wore a black bathing suit that did all it could and more for her bulk. She watched him slide the beach towel across his legs, protection against the sun doubling for actual self-dis-taste, she knew. "Your mother's very pretty," she remarked.

"You saw her?" He smiled without humor. "Peeking through the

curtain, dying to see who I was going out with. She'll be alone."

"You're all she has?"

"I've a sister—she lives her own life. She's married and off."

Grazia wedged the towel against his leg. "Very pretty," she repeated. "Was she born here?"

"No, in Ireland. Why?"

"Oh, I guess I'm just interested in everything. And you're the last of the line? You're a good man, Waldie."

"How am I to take that?"

She laughed with devilment. "To your mother, I mean. Let's have a swim."

She teased and held him off, he realized, running heavily behind her. She understood and did not. There was so much of Grazia to keep him intrigued. Did she want to understand, to hold him, he wondered, catching up to her, grabbing her swinging arm. She locked her fingers in his and continued to the water's edge. There was a distinct awareness in their touch.

Gracefully she withdrew her clasp, as they waded in. He swam beside her, feeling coltish and unrestrained. What's ten years' difference, he dreamed, a woman should be younger. He floated in the sun's face, frowning back at it. Tomorrow he'd be burned, his mother would have the salves and the scoldings going, but to hell with tomorrow. He flopped over and caught Grazia about the middle, off guard, for she went under and came up, burbling surprise. He kissed her square on the mouth, ducking under with her, savoring the taste of lake water on her lips, of fresh wonder.

Gently she pushed him from her as they surfaced. She was neither pleased nor displeased. "That's right," she said with unusual solemn-

nity, treading water, "enjoy life, Waldie. But keep it gay." She broke away from his reaching hand and swam quickly in, making a race of it. When they stepped on shore, they resumed their ground weight, becoming clumsy land creatures again, renouncing the fluid freedom of the watery element.

He watched her thoughtfully while she ate. No dream girl indeed—but what had he a right to expect? Were he free, which he was not, what might he rightfully hope for, Grazia serving him—he, her? Love must be more than service—passion, then? He'd felt that needle a moment back in the water—the prick of it stung him still. Passion to last between us two? he wondered. Why not, ah, why not? And a line of curly black heads, beautiful children, Waldie-Grazia blent.

He reached for another piece of the lemon meringue. Armand was enjoying the blond from the switchboard. They were on the blanket, embarrassingly oblivious. Armand always made good time. Now he pulled the blond to her feet and they went off toward the Blue Trail. No backward look—and no getting home before dark. Waldie smiled knowingly at Grazia. She patted his hand almost maternally.

"Alone on a lonely beach," she murmured. Her eyes were fond. "Is that all they think we want?" But not inviting. "That's how it goes," she said. "Me, I like it gay. So do you, Waldie, remember that. I'm going to take a nap." She stretched out on her stomach, pulled the blanket over her buttocks, breathing evenly.

He considered disturbing her, but unable to see her face, hesitated. Her breathing grew deeper. He shrugged, lit a cigarette, smoked it,

and began to feel drowsy himself. Armand and the blond discovered them so an hour later, sleeping side by side, innocent as babes in a field of poppies.

* * *

Molly was waiting, though it was past ten. She composed her face against worry telltales. "Was it a nice time?" she asked. "Ah, is that sunburn on your face?"

"Forget it," he said, "it doesn't hurt."

"A poultice of strong cold tea," she decided.

"I'm tired. Tomorrow's the start of the week. I'm for bed." He went in and undressed, escaping her watchfulness, himself much aware nonetheless. He felt like a heel. Entertaining such desires—what a fool—and her so old and dependent. He was her reason for existence, that was what. Kicking the goad brought chagrin. Was there no compromise, no middle ground? Something compelled, something not yet understood struggled for recognition. *Now or never*, it challenged, *now or never*. It clawed at his heart, ached his guts with its churning, burst his throat with gall.

He came out in his pajamas, tying the tasseled belt. She sat in the master chair, head caved into her chest with sad incomprehension. "Did you have company today?" he asked heartily.

She lifted eyes sunken into the late hour. "Rosie Dunn stopped." Her mouth moved stiffly. "The nosy witch, watching you go off with your friends from behind the screen."

"She knows Armand, I suppose?" he hedged. "I can imagine."

"Where there's smoke," she said tartly. "Rosie knows the girl he was with—better than you, I presume."

"Oh, well," he shrugged. "Ar-

mand's a big boy now. Rosie's jealous he never looked at her Margie."

"Is that a fact?" she asked politely.

"Any other visitors or news?" Waldie yawned.

"Rosie's evil was sufficient to the day," she said meaningfully.

"Well, I guess so. Good night, Mother."

She withdrew her ace. "She knows that other one, too, me bucko."

He turned slowly, his stomach sagging leaden. "Grazia?"

She nodded wisely. "The same one." And waited.

"Good night, Mother." He kissed her brow numbly, stroking her back with mechanical fingers. "I love but my best girl. No need to further concern your pretty head."

Her back stiffened. She got up and walked away from him. "Grazia," she spat the word. "What kind of a name is that? French? Eye-talian? English?"

His anger began slowly, mounted inexorably. "What difference does it make? I never asked. American, I suppose. Maybe even Irish?" His father's face was before him. "Would that make her acceptable? Would anyone be worthy to be your daughter-in-law?"

He might as well have struck her with that last iron phrase. "So Rosie's right," she reeled, "saying that one's out to get herself a man. A fat one would be all right—seeing she's so much flesh to barter herself. 'No robbery is fair exchange. Birds of a feather,' Rosie said, and smirked!"

Her outrage goaded him. "I've not asked her. You're giving me the idea. It's gone no further than mutual liking. There's been no talk of love, or marriage, or anything else! What is it you're hunting — some sin worse

than drunkenness, than divorce? A juicy, illicit affair you'd ferret out of me?"

She staggered to the rocker. Her pale eyes flooded, tears channeled down her cheeks. "That the day should come," she moaned, "when the staff of my life smites me. O widowed Mother Mary, take me now, for 'tis at this hour over. What have I had but misery from them all?"

His fury floundered on the full tide turning. Slowly, regretfully into the mist receded the scarce-conceived image of a line—veiled forms about-faced and went back to infinity. The mist closed them off, the child voices whispered away. Strength was drained from his great legs; he slumped at the feet of Molly, his mother, clasping her hand in his trembling own. "You needn't tell me again," he groaned, "there's no happiness in marriage. Nor in children. I've seen yourself, left with me—and small comfort now. I've seen Nell with her rotten choice confronting her for the rest of her life. And you, warding off the stigma. I know, Mother mine, I know."

Visibility was zero. He puckered his brow but could no longer even imagine the line—the voices once sharp through the fog. For Molly was weeping audibly now. If she kept up, she'd be sick, he knew. And taking

forever to recover, loading him with remorse and doctor bills for no thing a doctor could diagnose. "It's all over," he wheedled. "I swear to you on my knees—it's over, Mother mine."

She searched his face. "The strong, cold tea," she said. "I wonder would instant do? And after that—you look like you lack proper nourishment—a steak-broil for the two of us? Stay home and rest tomorrow; with that burn you'll have to." She giggled shyly. "I'll even try to manage a bit of the rare part of the steak. Get your robe now, whilst I light the gas. There's a loyal, good son."

Grazia would understand, he thought, donning his robe. Whatever brief bloom they'd found had been born of seed strewn into rocks, doomed because it lacked moisture. Sweet, sweet flower of the desert, forever to be remembered without rancor, shriveled under a white scar.

The steak sizzled aroma. Molly was humming again. He strode into the kitchen. He'd make the steak vanish in record time. A loyal, affectionate, hungry son. Vanish, vanishing, vanished. *Now or never.* So let it be never. Bleak indeed would be the day when he no longer had this understanding mother to cook, fuss over, and love him with eternal unselfishness.



Ship of Fools: Notes on Style

● Robert B. Heilman

i

Katherine Anne Porter is sometimes thought of as a stylist. "Stylist" is likely to call up unclear images of coloratura, acrobatics, elaborateness of gesture, a mingling of formalism probably euphuistic with conspicuous private variations, like fingerprints. It might call to mind Edward Dahlberg's peremptory dense texture of crusty archaism and thorny image, a laboriously constructed thicket so well guarding the estate of his mind that it often becomes that estate. It is not so with Miss Porter. There is nothing of arresting facade in her style, nothing of showmanship. Though on the lecture platform she can be all showman, and slip into the prima donna, in her proper medium both the public personality and the private being vanish from the stage. At least they are not easily detectable presences. In *Ship of Fools*¹ the style is a window of things and people, not a symbolic aggression of ego upon them. It seems compelled by the objects in the fiction; it is their visible surface, the necessary verbal form that makes their identity perceptible. It seems never the construction of an artist imposing, from her own nature, an arbitrary identity upon inert materials, but rather an emanation of the materials themselves, finding through the artist as uninterfering medium the stylistic mold proper to their own nature. Miss Porter is ruling all, of course, but she seems not to be ruling at all: hence of her style we use such terms as "distance," "elegance," and of course the very word for what she seems to have ceded, "control." She is an absentee presence: in one sense her style is no-style. No-style is what it will seem if style means some notable habit of rhythm or vocabulary, some uninterchangeable (though not unborrowable) advice that firmly announces "Faulkner" or "Hemingway." Miss Porter has no "signal" or call letters that identify a single station of wave length. She does not introduce herself or present herself. Much less does she gesticulate. She does not pray on street corners; wrestle with her subject in public as if she were barely managing to throw a troublesome devil; or lash her tail and arch her back like a cat demonstrating expertise with a mouse. She does not cry "Look, ma, no hands"; she just leaves hands out of it. Her style has neither birthmarks nor those plaintive rebirth-marks, tattoos. Not that she disdains embellishment; in her there is nothing of unwashed Kate in burlap ("I am life"). Nor, on the other hand, is there anything of frilly femininity tendering little dainties from a fragile sensibility ("I am beauty," "I am feeling").

ii

No-style means a general style, if we may risk such a term, a fusion of proved styles. She can do ordinary documentary whenever it is called for:

the ship's passengers "advertised on little thumbtacked slips of paper that they had lost or found jeweled combs, down pillows, tobacco pouches, small cameras, pocket mirrors, rosaries." Here she sticks to nouns; yet she has no fear of the adjectives somewhat in disrepute now: "In the white heat of an early August morning a few placid citizens of the white-linen class strolled across the hard-baked surface of the public square under the dusty shade of the sweet-by-night trees . . ." She relies without embarrassment on the plain, direct, ordinary, explicit. Veracruz "is a little purgatory"; Amparo decided "prematurely" that trouble was over. "Herr Lowenthal, who had been put at a small table by himself, studied the dinner card, with its list of unclean foods, and asked for a soft omelette with fresh green peas. He drank half a bottle of good wine to comfort himself . . ."

On such sturdy foundations of style she can build in several ways. Without altering the everyday, matter-of-fact manner, she gets below the surface. Glocken, the hunchback, "scared people off; his plight was so obviously desperate they were afraid some of it would rub off on them." "Rub off": imaging casually a world of prophylactic finickiness. Captain Thiele paces the deck "alone, returning the respectful salutations of the passengers with reluctant little jerks of his head, upon which sat a monumental ornate cap, white as plaster." The commonplace comparison, dropped in without commotion at the end, unobtrusively deflates the large official figure. Of a ship-board Communion service: "The priest went through the ceremony severely and hastily, placing the wafers on the outstretched tongues expertly and snatching back his hand." The plain adverbs suggest a minor public official in a distasteful routine: "snatching," the fear of contamination. Mrs. Treadwell leaves a self-pitying young man: "If she stayed to listen, she knew she would weaken little by little, she would warm up in spite of herself, perhaps in the end identify herself with the other, take on his griefs and wrongs, and if it came to that, feel finally guilty as if she herself had caused them; yes, and he would believe it too, and blame her freely." The easy lucidity never shirks depths or darks, which to some writers seem approachable only by the involute, the cryptic, or the tortuous.

Using the kind of elements that she does, she can organize them, elaborately if need be, with control and grace. The local papers "cannot praise too much the skill with which the members of good society maintain in their deportment the delicate balance between high courtesy and easy merriment, a secret of the Veracruz world bitterly envied and unsuccessfully imitated by the provincial inland society of the Capital." Under the gentle irony and the rhythm that serves it, lie in easy and well articulated orders a remarkable number of modifiers — such as Hardy would have fouled into knotty confusion, and James, pursuing precision, would have pried apart with preciosity in placement. She manages with equal skill the erection of ordinary terms, both concrete and analytical, into a periodic structure in which all elements converge unspectacularly on a climax of sudden insight: "The passengers, investigating the cramped airless quarters with their old-fashioned double tiers of bunks and a narrow hard couch along the opposite wall for the unlucky third comer, read the names on the doorplates — most of them German — eyed with suspicion and quick distaste luggage piled beside their

own in their cabins, and each discovered again what he had believed lost for a while though he could not name it — his identity." A compact sketch of outer world and inner meaning, it is never crowded or awkward or rambling.

Language as guarantor of identity: it is the kind of true perception regularly conveyed in terms modest and unstraining, but fresh and competent. Of the troubles of boarding ship: "This common predicament did not by any means make of them fellow sufferers." Each kept "his pride and separateness within himself"; "there crept into eyes meeting unwillingly . . . a look of unacknowledged, hostile recognition. 'So there you are again, I never saw you before in my life,' the eyes said." Of David Scott's special capacity for triumph as a lover: "Feeling within him his coldness of heart as a real power in reserve, he . . . laid his hand over hers warmly" — with just a shadow of oxymoron to accent the reality without calling attention to itself. Jenny Brown, his girl, had a "fondness for nearness, for stroking, touching, nestling, with a kind of sensuality so diffused it almost amounted to coldness after all": the plain tactile words preparing for the shrewd analysis in which the paradox is not thrust triumphantly at one but offered almost experimentally. There is a good deal of this relaxed movement between the physical and the psychic or moral, each grasped directly and surely. The Spanish dancers "would look straight at you and laugh as if you were an object too comic to believe, yet their eyes were cold and they were not enjoying themselves, even at your expense." The vocabulary is hardly more than elementary, and the words are arranged in a classic compound structure, almost as in an exercise book, yet they communicate a disturbing hardness. The next sentence is of the same stamp but is trimmed back sharply to an almost skeletal simplicity: "Frau Hutten had observed them from the first and she was afraid of them." The fear is ours, but not through a tensed-up stylistic staging of fear.

Miss Porter can combine words unexpectedly without becoming ostentatious: for instance, an adjective denoting mood or value with a neutral noun — "serious, well-shaped head," "weak dark whiskers," or, more urgently, "strong white rage of vengeful sunlight"; or sex words with gastric facts — "They fell upon their splendid full-bodied German food with hot appetites." She pairs partly clashing words: "softened and dispirited" (of a woman affected by childbirth), "with patience and a touch of severity" (of people waiting for the boat to leave), "oafish and devilish at once" (of a nagging inner voice), "at once crazed and stupefied" (of the air of a bad eating place): and gets inner contradictions in sharp phrases: "this pugnacious assertion of high breeding," "classic erotic-frowning smile" (of a dancer), "shameless pathos" (of an angry face). She can surprise, and convince, with a preposition: a newly married couple's "first lessons in each other."

She has strong, accurate, but not conspicuous, metaphors: "soggy little waiter," "pink-iced tea-cake of sympathy," "hand-decorated hates," "making conversation to scatter silence," a "laugh was a long cascade of falling tinware." But metaphors are less numerous than similes, that now less fashionable figure to which Miss Porter turns with instinctive ease, rarely without amplifying the sense or shading the tone, and always with the added thrust of imagistic vitality. She may fix the object visually: Elsa Lutz had a "crease of fat like a goiter at the base of the throat"; on her canvases Jenny Brown

painted cubistic designs "in primary colors like fractured rainbows." She has a sense of how the inanimate may creep up on or take over the human: the steerage passengers "slept piled upon each other like dirty rags thrown out on a garbage heap"; or how a human attribute may be dehumanized: the Spanish dancers' voices "crashed like breaking crockery." When a woman, confident of her worldly knowingness, is publicly snubbed by the Captain, she first turns red; then her blush "vanished and left her pale as unborn veal" — colorless, unknowing, pre-innocent, pre-calf. When his wife bursts forth with a public expression of views contrary to his own, Professor Hutten "sat like something molded in sand, his expression that of a strong innocent man gazing into a pit of cobras." It is a complete picture of mood and man. Miss Porter confers her own incisive perception of character upon Jenny Brown when she has Jenny thinking about David Scott, ". . . I'll be carrying David like a petrified fetus for the rest of my life." Jenny's sense of rigidity and immaturity in her lover is really an echo of her creator's sense of many of her human subjects: she sees them with easy clarity and goes right to the point. Her images for them come solidly out of life; they are not stylistic gestures, literary exercises, but unlabored responses to need, responses from experience against which the door of feeling and knowing have never been closed.

The difficulty of describing a style without mannerisms, crotchetts, or even characteristic brilliances or unique excellences leads one constantly to use such terms as *plain*, *direct*, *ordinary*, *unpretentious*, *lucid*, *candid*. These are neither derogatory nor limiting words, nor words that one is altogether content with. The qualities that they name are not inimical to the subtle or the profound, to the penetrating glance or the inclusive sweep. Whether Miss Porter's basic words are a multitude of documentary nouns or adjectives, are literally descriptive or pointedly or amplifyingly imagistic, are terms that report or present or comment or analyze, she composes them, without evident struggle, in a great variety of ways — in combinations of revelatory unexpectedness; tersely or compactly or with unencumbered elaboration, either in a succession of ordered dependencies or in structured periods where everything builds to a final emphasis; with an apparently automatic interplay of force and fluency; meticulously but not pickily or gracelessly; with a kind of graceful adjustment to situation that we call urbanity, yet by no means an urbanity that implies charm or agreeableness at the expense of firmness or conviction.

iii

Certain of Miss Porter's arrangements disclose characteristic ways of perceiving and shaping her materials. She describes Veracruz as a "typical port town, cynical by nature, shameless by experience, hardened to showing its seamiest side to strangers: ten to one this stranger passing through is a sheep bleating for their shears, and one in ten is a scoundrel it would be a pity not to outwit." The traditional rhetoric — the triad series; the first half balanced against the second, which is balanced internally; the antithesis and chiasmus — is the instrument of clarity, analytical orderliness, and de-

tachment. Miss Porter has a notable talent for the succinct summarizing sequence; she often employs the series, which combines specification with despatch; through it a packing together of near synonyms may master by saturation, or a quick-fingered catalogue may grasp a rush of simultaneous or consecutive events. A dancer's "pantomime at high speed" to an infatuated pursuer communicates "pity for him or perhaps his stupidity, contempt for the Lutzes, warning, insult, false commiseration, and finally, just plain ridicule." A series may define by a concise anatomy: William Denny's "mind seemed to run monotonously on women, or rather, sex; money, or rather his determination not to be gypped by anybody; and his health." Such series remind one of Jane Austen, who can often look at people and things as logically placeable, sometimes dismissible by a quick list of traits, or naturally amenable to a 1-2-3 kind of classification. Miss Porter has a marked Jane Austen side, which appears, for instance, in the dry summation of a girl and her parents: their "three faces were calm, grave, and much alike," with the anticlimax offhand instead of sharpened up into a shattering deflation. Miss Porter's comic sense is like Austen's both in the use of pithy geometrical arrangements and in the presentment of observed ironies, sometimes suffusing a whole scene, sometimes clipped down as in neoclassical verse: Elsa Lutz spoke "with a surprising lapse into everyday common sense" (cf. "But Shadwell seldom deviates into sense"); Herr Lowenthal felt "he was living in a world so dangerous he wondered how he dared go to sleep at night. But he was sleepy at that very moment." (Cf. "And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake.") The irony is Austen-like when, though piercing, it is less censorious than tolerantly amused: "With relief he seized upon this common sympathy between them, and they spent a profitable few minutes putting the Catholic Church in its place." It may catch a social group, gently replacing the group's sense of itself by another: at the Captain's table Frau Rittersdorf "turned her most charming smile upon the Captain, who rewarded her with a glimpse of his two front teeth and slightly upturned mouthcorners. The others ranged round him, faces bent towards him like sunflowers to the sun, waiting for him to begin conversation." It may go beneath the surface to capture habits of mind, setting them up in a neat balance that comments on their insufficiency: Jenny Brown thinks wryly of "the family attitude" — suspicion of the worst based on insufficient knowledge of her life, and moral disapproval based firmly on their general knowledge of the weakness of human nature."

Yet to a passage with a strong Austen cast Miss Porter may make an inconspicuous addition that will elusively but substantially alter it. When Lizzi Spockenkieker runs carelessly into pompous Captain Thiele, he "threw an arm about her stiffly," and she, "blushing, whinnying, cackling, scrambling, embraced him about the neck wildly as if she were drowning." There is the Austen series crisply hitting off the ludicrous behavior, but there is more visual imagery than Austen uses, more of the physically excessive, and "whinnying" and "cackling," dehumanizing words, carry the joke beyond the usual limit of the Austen mode. It is more like Charlotte Bronte, who could often plunge into the comic, but was likely to do it more fiercely and scornfully. With Bronte, the absurd more quickly edged into the grotesque

and even the sinister; she had an awareness of potential damage not easily contained within a pure comic convention. Miss Porter is much closer to Bronte than to Austen in her description of Dr. Schumann when he catches the evil Spanish twins in another destructive practical joke: he "examined the depths of their eyes for a moment with dismay at their blind, unwinking malignance, their cold slyness — not beasts, though, but human souls."

Or consider this comment on a group of first-class passengers looking down on a steerage meal and feeling that the poor people there were being treated decently: "Murmuring among themselves like pigeons . . . (they) seemed to be vaguely agreed that to mistreat the poor is not right, and they would be the first to say so, at any time. Therefore they were happy to be spared this unpleasant duty, to have their anxieties allayed, their charitable feelings soothed." With the subdued ironic contemplation of the group, and with the series that dexterously encompasses their mood, this could be Austen's; and yet behind the smile-provoking self-deceit there is a kind of moral frailty, a trouble-breeding irresponsibility, and in the steerage sights a degree of wretchedness, that extends beyond the borders of the comic perspective. Here, as elsewhere, Miss Porter's manner is reminiscent of George Eliot's — of a carefully, accurately analytical style that is the agent of a mature psychic and moral understanding. David Scott observes the non-dancers: "the born outsiders; the perpetual uninvited; the unwanted; and those who, like himself, for whatever sad reason, refused to join in." The series serves no comic end, speaks for no rationally organizing mind; it makes nice distinctions among the members of a class, somberly, with a mere touch of restrained sympathy to soften the categorical lines. Freytag mentally accuses boat travelers, who "can't seem to find any middle ground between stiffness, distrust, total rejection, or a kind of invasive, gnawing curiosity." The general precision is especially notable in the fresh, climactic joining of the learned "invasive" with the common "gnawing," the latter used uncharacteristically of an external trouble. There is an Eliot-like perceptiveness in Freytag's discovery "about most persons — that their abstractions and generalizations, their Rage for Justice or Hatred of Tyranny or whatever, too often disguised a bitter personal grudge of some sort far removed from the topic apparently under discussion" and in the matter-of-fact postscript that Freytag applied this only to others, never to himself. Miss Porter has repeated need for a vocabulary of emotional urgency, of tensions beyond comedy, as in Jenny Brown's concluding observation on the split with her family: "But that didn't keep you from loving them, nor them from loving you, with that strange longing, demanding, hopeless tenderness and bitterness, wound into each other in a net of living nerves." Here the terms for human contradictions are different in kind from those which present simply laughable incongruities. There is an Eliot note both in this and in another passage on the same page in which we are given a saddened sense of necessities which might, but does not, drift into bitterness: "She did not turn to them at last for help, or consolation, or praise, or understanding, or even love; but merely at last because she was incapable of turning away."

The language and syntax reveal Miss Porters eye for precision, specification, and distinctions. There is the same precision in the definition of Frey-

tag's "hardened expression of self-absorbed, accusing, utter righteousness" and of a stewardess's "unpleasant mixture of furtive insolence and false abasement, the all too familiar look of resentful servility." Freytag himself distinguishes the phases of another personality: "overfamiliar if you made the mistake of being pleasant to him; loud and insolent if he suspected timidity in you; sly and cringing if you knew how to put him in his place." David prefers, he thinks, "Mrs. Treadwell's unpretentious rather graceful lack of moral sense to Jenny's restless seeking outlaw nature trying so hard to attach itself at any or all points to the human beings nearest her: no matter who." Miss Porter confers her own flair for distinctions upon certain characters. Thus Dr. Schumann, planning to go to confession: ". . . he felt not the right contrition, that good habit of the spirit, but a personal shame, a crushing humiliation at the disgraceful nature of what he had to confess." And it is near the end of the book that Jenny, the most sentient and spontaneous character, reflects upon her griefs over love that did not fulfill expectations: "— and what had it been but the childish refusal to admit and accept on some term or other the difference between what one hoped was true and what one discovers to be the mere laws of the human condition?" The clarity in words comes here from the character's clarity of thought, and this in turn from the writer's clarity of mind. Thus an examination of style in the narrower sense of verbal deportment leads, as it repeatedly does, to the style in conceiving — to the "styling" of, we might say — episode and character, and from this on to the ultimate style of creative mind: the grasp of fact and the moral sense.

We have been following Miss Porter's range: from wit to wisdom, from the sense of the laughable slip or flaw to the awareness of graver self-deception and self-seeking, and to the feeling for reality that at once cuts through illusion and accepts, among the inevitable facts of life, the emotional pressures that lead to, and entangle, fulfillment and discord. Now beside this central sober work of reflective intelligence and alert conscience put the gay play of the Captain's being driven, by a "lethal cloud of synthetic rose scent" at dinner, to sneeze: "He sneezed three times inwardly, on forefinger pressed firmly to his upper lip as he had been taught to do in childhood, to avoid sneezing in church. Silently he was convulsed with internal explosions, feeling as if his eyeballs would fly out, or his eardrums burst. At last he gave up and felt for his handkerchief, sat up stiffly, head averted from the room, and sneezed steadily in luxurious agony a dozen times with muted sounds and streaming eyes, until the miasma was sneezed out, and he was rewarded with a good nose-blow." This is farce, the comedy of the physical in which mind and feelings are engaged either not at all, or only mechanically: of the perversity of things and circumstances that render one absurd or grotesque with merely formal suffering, not the authentic kind that by stirring sympathy cuts off outrageous laughter. To say that it is in the vein of Smollett is to emphasize both its present rareness outside the work of committed funny-men and the extraordinariness of having it juxtaposed with writing of sensitiveness and thoughtfulness. Farce may have a satirical note, as in this note on Lizzi Spockenkieker's disappointment with Herr Rieber, her would-be lover: "Every other man she had known had unfailingly pronounced the

magic word *marriage* before ever he got into bed with her, no matter what came of it in fact." A little earlier, Herr Rieber, a short fat man, having gone through suitable amatory preliminaries, decided that his hour had come and, "with the silent intentness of a man bent on crime," maneuvered Lizzi, a tall thin woman, "to the dark side of the ship's funnel. He gave his prey no warning . . . It was like embracing a windmill. Lizzi uttered a curious tight squeal, and her long arms gathered him in around his heaving middle . . . She gave him a good push and they fell backward clutched together, her long active legs overwhelmed him, she rolled him over flat on his back, . . . Lizzi was spread upon him like a fallen tent full of poles, . . ." Herr Rieber's passion for flesh and conquest is defeated, turned into grief, by the vigorous surrender that has swept him into unorthodox subordination, and he can get rid of his victorious victim, who is in a "carnivorous trance," only by gasping to her in agony that they are watched by Bebe, the fat and generally seasick dog of Professor Hutten. Bebe, only three feet away, "the folds of his nose twitching, regarded them with an expression of animal cunning that most embarrassingly resembled human knowledge of the seamy side of life." After all the modern solemnities about sex, this sheer farce — with the farcical morality of the dog as grave censor — is reassuring evidence that a fuller, more flexible, less doleful sense of sexual conduct can be recovered.

For a final note on Miss Porter's great range, we can contrast this hilarious Smollettian jest with two quite dissimilar passages. One is the vivid imaging, in her visible gestures, of the inner unwellness of a Spanish countess: "Thumbs turned in lightly to the palm, the hands moved aimlessly from the edge of the table to her lap, they clasped and unclasped themselves, spread themselves flat in the air, closed, shook slightly, went to her hair, to the bosom of her gown, as if by a life of their own separate from the will of the woman herself, who sat quite still otherwise, features a little rigid, bending over to read the dinner card beside her plate." Though here there is a more detailed visualization of the symbolizing object, the feeling for the troubled personality is like Charlotte Bronte's. To this Countess, Dr. Schumann feels attracted, guiltily. After seeing her, "He lay down with his rosary in his fingers, and began to invite sleep, darkness, silence, that little truce of God between living and dying; he put out of his mind, with deliberate intention to forget forever, the last words of that abandoned lost creature; nettles, poisoned barbs, fish hooks, her words clawed at his mind with the terrible malignance of the devil-possessed, the soul estranged from its kind." In the meditative element, in the imaging of a remembered frenzy, and most of all in the particular moral sense that leads to the words "soul estranged from its kind," the account is reminiscent of Conrad.

Range means contrasts such as these. Often, too, there is direct juxtaposition of different styles. Miss Porter can write page after page of sonorous periods — plausible, not overplayed — for Professor Hutten's dinner disquisitions to a captive audience, and then shift bluntly to Frau Hutten's perspective: "He was boring them to death again, she could feel it like vinegar in her veins" — another trenchant simile. Here are two ways of commenting on intelligence: the cultivated irony of "[Elsa's] surprising lapse into every-

day common sense," and, on the next page, Jenny's breezy colloquial hyperbole for the Cuban students, "The trouble . . . is simply that they haven't been born yet." David Scott solemnly claims a high disgust for sexual binges: "He had felt superior to his acts and to his partners in them, and altogether redeemed and separated from their vileness by that purifying contempt"; Jenny retorts, with pungent plainness, "Men love to eat themselves sick and then call their upchuck by high-sounding names." Or there is the innocent, flat-voiced irony of Miss Porter's comment on the "lyric prose" of newspapers reporting parties "lavish and aristocratic — the terms are synonymous, they believe" and on newly boarded passengers wandering "about in confusion with the air of persons who have abandoned something of great importance on shore, though they cannot think what it is"; and beside this the vulgar force appropriate to a tactical thought of Herr Rieber's: "A man couldn't be too cautious with that proper, constipated type, no matter how gamey she looked."

iv

In their slangy vigor or insouciance, their blunt and easy immediacy, their spurning of the genteel, their casual clinicality, their nervous grip on strain and tension, some of these passages have an air that, whether in self-understanding or self-love, we call "modern." The novel has many such, and they evidence in another way the range of Miss Porter's style. However, the modernity need be stressed only enough to acknowledge that the style, like any well-wrought individual style, cannot be wholly placed by comparison with well-known styles. My principal points, nevertheless, have been that Miss Porter's style has strong affiliations with the Austen and Eliot styles, that its main lines are traditional rather than innovating, and that it is markedly devoid of namable singularities, mannerisms, private idioms, self-indulgent or striven-for uniquenesses that give a special coloration. These points are interrelated; to some extent, they are different emphases of a central truth.

To claim for a writer affinities with Austen and Eliot (and to note, as evidence of her variety, occasional reminiscences of other writers) may seem faint praise in an age quick to think, in many areas, We have left all that behind us. The procedure does have its risks, and a disavowal or two may be in order. To note a resemblance in styles is not to make premature judgments of over-all merit, which involves other problems not dealt with here, and which in the end must be left to history. It is not to suggest influences, imitation, idle repetition, failure of originality, or limitedness. On the contrary, it is a way of suggesting superiority in the individual achievement: here is a writer working independently, composing out of her own genius, and yet in her use of the language exhibiting admirable qualities that seem akin to those of distinguished predecessors. It is a way of proposing, perhaps, that she has got hold of some central virtues of the language, virtues whether of strength or grace, that tend to recur and that, whatever the modification of them from writer to writer, may in essence be inseparable from good writing. To say this is to imply a traditional style, or core of elements of style. To hypothesize a tradition is precarious, since the word seems likely to make

critics either a bit solemn, seven-candled, and hieratic on the one hand, or, on the other, self-righteous, flambeaux-lighted, and rebellious with an anticlerical fervor. I venture the word, not to beg a theoretical issue or invoke a charm or scorn a curse, but to suggest figuratively a group of long-enduring ways of using the language, apparent norms of utility, representative workings-out of possibility. These would constitute a discipline of eccentricity but not a constraint on originality; to call a writer a traditionalist in style would involve the old paradox of unique personality seizing on the universal thing or mode.

It is in such terms that one must approach Miss Porter's style. Though it looks easy rather than hard, it has a certain elusiveness that makes it not quite easy to account for. It would be difficult to imitate or parody, for what is most open to copying or travestying is the novelty, the idiosyncrasy, the raw ego in words that betokens a flight from or an inability to get hold of some persisting "nature" in the art forms of one's own tongue. Miss Porter has a very wide vocabulary, but no pet vocabulary; she has considerable skill in compositional patterns but no agonized specializations of order. She is exact and explicit; she eschews mystery in the medium without losing the mystery in the matter. The solidity of her writing, of the *how* that implies the *what*, we signify by naming her peers. Her variety appears in an obviously wide spectrum of tones and attitudes, rarely with the pen as pardoner of all, or the stylus as stiletto, but within these extremes modulating easily among the contemptible, the laughable, the pitiable, the evasive laudable, and, most of all, the ever-present contradictory — of face and heart, belief and deed, illusion and fact — that regularly compels one to look anew at all familiar surfaces.

¹I am arbitrarily limiting this essay to the latest work. One cannot talk about style without using many examples; to bring in the stories and novellas would expand the study to inordinate length.



She Stands Alone

● James F. Powers

It is unprofitable to compare Katherine Anne Porter with other writers. The only one she is really like is herself. From the very first, she seems to have known what she was doing — that only her best would be good enough for her. She hasn't written any "yarns," and she hasn't let the daemons take over. She has approached life reverently in her stories, and it lives on in them. She has been given a very great gift, and she has kept it — by risking it. Nobody else could have written the story "Holiday," published a couple of years ago. One could say this about other stories of hers, and about stories by others, I know, but I think Katherine Anne Porter has usually worked on a higher wire than others: she has seen and felt more above *and* below, and, without huffing and puffing, has given us more — the nearest thing yet to reality in American fiction.

Collecting Katherine A. Porter

● R. W. Stallman

Sometime during the early 1950's Katherine Anne Porter was a staff member of the University of Connecticut Writers' Conference, which I directed 1950-1955. Her lecture was scheduled for 8 p. m., but she didn't show up at 8 p. m. Odd, said I, why isn't she here? Well, she must be found, and no doubt she's at her dormitory across the campus, but why isn't she here now at the lecture hall where 300 persons await her? In a huff I cross the campus to fetch her, Katherine Anne Porter in dormitory X. And there she is. She's waiting for me to come to fetch her! A Southern gentleman would have done it that way. He'd have escorted Miss Porter to her lecture-platform, etc. Well, I'll be damned. We Northerners, we ain't got no sense of decorum. But on the other hand, maybe you Southerners ain't got no sense of contract and terms agreed upon.

Ah, said Katherine Anne as I escorted her from her dormitory to the lecture hall, I'm going to read passages from my published works. Oh, no, you're not, said I (having in mind the terms of our contract). You are going to discuss literature, but you are *not* going to read your own works. I beg you to concede my point. Miss Porter conceded and then fashioned before her audience a brilliant display of off-the-cuff notes having to do with *her* creative process, etc. There wasn't much substance to what she said, but her performance was amusing, engaging, and winning.

